

TRUTH AND CONVENTION  
IN BYZANTINE  
DESCRIPTIONS OF WORKS OF ART

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## INTRODUCTION\*

SINCE the Renaissance, commentators have seen abstraction as a major characteristic of Byzantine art. It was on account of its lack of naturalism that Vasari, in the sixteenth century, condemned the Byzantine style. In his view this "style of lines and profiles" represented a low point in the history of painting; it was only the genius of such artists as Cimabue and Giotto that restored painting on its correct course toward the imitation of nature.<sup>1</sup> In our own century, on the other hand, the unnaturalistic qualities of Byzantine art have been regarded with favor. The critic Clive Bell, for example, wrote in 1914 that "Post-Impressionism . . . shakes hands across the ages with the Byzantine primitives."<sup>2</sup> He even went so far as to say that "Giotto's art is definitely inferior to the very finest Byzantine of the eleventh and twelfth centuries."<sup>3</sup> The writing of a pioneer of abstract painting, Kandinsky, testifies that Byzantine art has exerted an influence on the development of modern art.<sup>4</sup> But if we have now come to respect Byzantine art because of its abstract tendency, it is puzzling that this aspect of it seems to have been neither valued nor even acknowledged by Byzantine commentators themselves. Byzantine descriptions of their own works of art, at whatever period they were written, usually stress the realism of the art, and reveal no awareness of any lack of naturalism. It has been suggested that the reason for this discrepancy between the post-Renaissance view of Byzantine art and that of Byzantine writers is that they were following a literary tradition which had been formulated in the classical period.<sup>5</sup>

Ekphrasis, or description, was one of the standard exercises of late antique rhetoric to which a Byzantine, even as late as the fifteenth century, was subjected in the course of his primary education.<sup>6</sup> Ekphraseis were written in verse and in prose. Sometimes they stood on their own, but often they were incorporated into longer compositions, such as letters, sermons, and histories. The form of ekphrasis had been defined in the second century A.D. by the sophist Hermogenes of Tarsus. He says that the description can be

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<sup>1</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. R. Bettarini (Florence, 1968), II, 37 and 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Art* (London, 1914), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York, 1947), 76.

<sup>5</sup> This point has been emphasized by C. Mango, in "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder," *DOP*, 17 (1963), 65f., and again in *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, Sources and Documents in the History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, 1972), xivf.

<sup>6</sup> See R. J. H. Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," *DOP*, 17 (1963), 39ff., esp. 43, and M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971), 85.

of "... persons, deeds, times, places, seasons, and many other things,"<sup>7</sup> and that it should be vivid, and full of detail. He gives, as an example, the outline of an ekphrasis of a war, saying that it should include "... the levying of troops, the expenditures, the fears, then the engagements, the slaughters, the deaths, then the victory, then the paeans of the victors, and the tears of the defeated and their bondage."<sup>8</sup>

When classical authors wrote ekphraseis of paintings and sculptures they evaluated the art with respect to its truth to nature. The more realistic the work, the better it was, and the more vivid was the literary description. This standard of judgment was taken over by Byzantine writers and applied to mediaeval works. One aspect of realism to which both classical and Byzantine authors gave particular attention was the depiction of emotions, such as fear, joy, and sorrow. Hermogenes of Tarsus had included descriptions of fear and grief as necessary components of an ekphrasis on a war. Classical and Byzantine authors also used such descriptions to engage the reader's sympathy when they wrote about works of art. But many modern observers, from Vasari's day to the present, have felt that Byzantine art is neither as realistic, nor as adept in the portrayal of the emotions, as classical, and especially Hellenistic art. For this reason doubt has been thrown on the sincerity of the Byzantine writers. The inflexibility of the literary tradition, in face of the great artistic changes which we know to have taken place between antiquity and the Middle Ages, puts in question the validity of the ekphraseis.

The Byzantine ekphraseis copied ancient models not only in their general standard of judgment, but also in their specific language. There was a constant repetition of clichés, paraphrases, and quotations, some of which were of considerable length. These *topoi* cast further doubt on the accuracy of the ekphraseis. It is reasonable to ask how often Byzantine writers looked at the works which they described, and how far their descriptions were purely literary exercises, based on written models.

This article, then, is an enquiry into the relevance of the ekphraseis to the history of Byzantine art. It falls into two sections. The first attempts to discover instances of spontaneous observation by Byzantine writers, and of the appreciation of qualities peculiar to specific phases of Byzantine art. The second section discusses the extent to which the employment of literary conventions in the ekphraseis affected their accuracy as descriptions and their value as expressions of Byzantine attitudes to art.

## I. SPONTANEOUS OBSERVATIONS IN THE EKPHRASEIS

Modern literature on the Byzantine ekphraseis has concentrated on their archaeological interest. The ekphraseis have been seen as valuable keys to

<sup>7</sup> Γίνονται δὲ ἐκφράσεις προσώπων τε καὶ πραγμάτων καὶ καιρῶν καὶ τόπων καὶ χρόνων καὶ πολλῶν ἑτέρων. *Progymnasmata*, 10, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig, 1913), 22, line 9f.

<sup>8</sup> Πρῶτον μὲν τὰ πρὸ τοῦ πολέμου ἐροῦμεν, τὰς στρατολογίας, τὰ ἀναλώματα, τοὺς φόβους, εἶτα τὰς συμβολάς, τὰς σφαγάς, τοὺς θανάτους, εἶτα τὸ τρόπαιον, εἶτα τοὺς παιᾶνας τῶν νενικηκότων, τῶν δὲ τὰ δάκρυα, τὴν δουλείαν. *Progymnasmata*, 10, ed. Rabe, 23, line 2ff.

the reconstruction of lost monuments.<sup>9</sup> Little has been written on the ekphraseis as expressions of Byzantine attitudes toward art and architecture. The most important work on this subject is a paper published in 1930 by Oskar Wulff which draws attention to Byzantine descriptions of architectural spaces.<sup>10</sup> These often seem strikingly apt, when they are assessed in relation to surviving buildings. However, on the question of the validity of Byzantine descriptions of painting and sculpture, the opinions of scholars have been divided. Some authors have stressed the dominance of literary tradition and the discrepancy between the bias toward naturalism shown in the literature and the apparent abstraction of much surviving Byzantine art.<sup>11</sup> Others, taking a less skeptical point of view, have pleaded for a limited acceptance of the ekphraseis.<sup>12</sup> But although the problem of the relevance of the ekphraseis is obviously one of great importance for our understanding of Byzantine art, it has not been given the detailed examination which it deserves.

In a number of the ekphraseis the authors are careful to point out in their introductions that they have themselves looked at the works of art which they are about to describe. Lucian, for example, introducing his description of a painting of the Marriage of Alexander and Roxana, declares: "The painting is in Italy; I myself have seen it, so I may describe it to you."<sup>13</sup> In the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa introduces a description devoted to paintings of the Sacrifice of Isaac with these words: "I have often seen this event in painting, and I could not pass by the sight without tears, as art brought the story vividly under my eyes."<sup>14</sup> St. Gregory's statements are echoed in a twelfth-century homily on the Massacre of the Innocents. The author<sup>14a</sup> says: "I saw this event depicted in colors on a panel, and I was moved to pity and tears."<sup>15</sup> Another twelfth-century writer, Constantine Manasses, seems to make a distinction between information on works of art which

<sup>9</sup> This approach is exemplified by the work of A. Heisenberg, *Grabeskirche und Apostelkirche*. I, *Die Grabeskirche in Jerusalem*, and II, *Die Apostelkirche in Konstantinopel* (Leipzig, 1908). Heisenberg attempted a detailed reconstruction of these buildings primarily on the basis of literary descriptions.

<sup>10</sup> "Das Raumerlebnis des Naos im Spiegel der Ekphrasis," *BZ*, 30 (1929-30), 531 ff.

<sup>11</sup> See particularly Mango, "Antique Statuary," 65f. John Beckwith has also stressed the element of literary convention in the ekphraseis, in *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 161.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., A. Muñoz, "Le ekphraseis nella letteratura bizantina e i loro rapporti con l'arte figurata," *Recueil Kondakov* (Prague, 1926), 139 ff.; E. Kitzinger, "The Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," *DOP*, 17 (1963), 95 ff., esp. 109 f.

<sup>13</sup> ἔστιν ἡ εἰκὼν ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ, κἀγὼ εἶδον ὥστε καὶ σοὶ ἂν εἰπεῖν ἔχοιμι. *Herodotus sive Aëtion*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Εἶδον πολλάκις ἐπὶ γραφῆς εἰκόνα τοῦ πάθους, καὶ οὐκ ἄδακρυτὶ τὴν θῆαν παρῆλθον, ἐναργῶς τῆς τέχνης ὑπ' ὅψιν ἀγούσης τὴν ἱστορίαν. *De deitate Filii et Spiritus sancti*, PG, 46, col. 572C.

<sup>14a</sup> Identified as the South Italian preacher Philagathus by A. Ehrhard, *Überlieferung und Bestand der hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der griechischen Kirche*, pt. I, vol. III, fasc. 7 (Leipzig, 1943), 631 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Εἶδον ἐγὼ τοῦτο τὸ πάθος χρώματι γεγραμμένον ἐν πίνακι, καὶ πρὸς οἶκτον ἐκινήθην, καὶ δάκρυα. "Theophanes Cerameus," *Homilia* LII, *In sanctos Innocentes*, PG, 132, col. 924B (= *Homilia* XXIV.9, ed. G. Rossi Taibbi, in *Filagato da Cerami, Omelie per i vangeli domenicali e le feste di tutto l'anno*, I [Palermo, 1969], 159). Gregory of Nyssa was also quoted in an anonymous description of a scene from the life of St. Nicholas of Myra in an eleventh-century manuscript in Milan (Biblioteca Ambrosiana, gr. D. 92, fol. 59): Εἶδον τοῦτο πολλάκις κεχαραγμένον ἐν πίναξιν . . . καὶ μόνω τῷ τύπῳ τῆς θῆας ἡλιγγιάσας οὐκ ἄδακρυτὶ παρελήλυθα. G. Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos*, II (Leipzig, 1917), 166. I owe this reference to the kindness of Dr. Nancy Ševčenko.



he has received from books, and his own observations. He prefaces his description of a floor mosaic in the Great Palace at Constantinople with references to the bronze heifer by the classical artist Myron and the seated Hercules by Lysippus. He repeats the old story of the heifer attracting a live bull, and says that the Hercules was shown lamenting his fate. Then he remarks: "These things have been written in books and are inscribed in the histories, but I have seen the work of a painter's hand, and my eyes have been bewitched at the sight . . . ." <sup>16</sup> Constantine Manasses then explains that his description will make the work accessible to those who have not seen it.

If we are to believe these writers, they have based their ekphraseis on their own observation of works of art. But one wonders whether this claim, which, after all, is a convention, is true or false. It is very easy to demonstrate instances in which the writers of the ekphraseis obviously took no account of the works of art at all. There are several instances of entire descriptions being plagiarized from earlier authors. For example, John Phocas, a monk at the monastery of St. John on the island of Patmos, wrote an account of a journey in Palestine which he made in 1177. Amongst the sights which he described was a mosaic of the Nativity with the Annunciation to the Shepherds, which decorated the Grotto underneath the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (the mosaic is now lost). <sup>17</sup> John Phocas discussed this work of art at some length, but not from his own observation. The passage was for the most part copied verbatim from a sixth-century description by the orator Choricus of the mosaics in the church of St. Sergius in Gaza. <sup>18</sup> The same source was used as a model by John Phocas for his description of the representation of the Annunciation at the site of Joseph's house. <sup>19</sup>

Another Byzantine author who wrote descriptions of works of art which were entirely derived from earlier ekphraseis was the fourteenth-century poet Manuel Philes. One of his poems paraphrases the second-century description by Lucian of a painting of the Marriage of Alexander and Roxana. The derivation is admitted in the title to the poem. <sup>20</sup> Another poem of the Palaeologan period, ascribed by its title to Manuel Melissenus, paraphrases the twelfth-century ekphrasis of a floor mosaic which was composed by Constantine Manasses. <sup>21</sup> Constantine's ekphrasis was devoted to a mosaic in a bed chamber

<sup>16</sup> Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν κἀν ταῖς βίβλοις γεγράφεται καὶ ταῖς ἱστορίαις ἀνάγραπτα φέρεται, ἐγὼ δὲ ζωγράφου χειρὸς ἔργον ἰδὼν καὶ τὰς ὀφεις καταγοητευθεὶς τῷ θεάματι . . . Ed. L. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte," *ÖJh*, 5 (1902), Beiblatt, col. 75, lines 33 ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae*, PG, 133, cols. 957D, 960A–B; K. Krumbacher<sup>2</sup>, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur* (Munich, 1897), 420.

<sup>18</sup> *Laudatio Marciani*, I.51 ff., ed. R. Foerster and E. Richsteig, Teubner (1929). The authors of *The Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem*, ed. R. W. Schultz (London, 1910), do not seem to have been aware of the source of John's description. His ekphrasis is quoted in connection with the mosaic at Bethlehem, and he is described as a "shrewd and receptive spectator" (page 65). Dalton even found some of the details described by John Phocas characteristic of the art of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and not of earlier times, in spite of the fact that Choricus had described these very details over 600 years before (page 50).

<sup>19</sup> *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae*, PG, 133, cols. 936B–C; *Laudatio Marc.*, I.48 f.

<sup>20</sup> *Manuelis Philae carmina*, ed. E. Miller, II (Paris, 1857), 336 f.; Lucian, *Herodotus sive Aëtion*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Manuelis Philae carmina*, ed. Miller, II, 267 f.; ed. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte," cols. 74 ff., 79 ff.

of the Great Palace, which was evidently of the *asaratos oikos* type and portrayed an assortment of objects and creatures arranged as if they had been strewn on a floor. The lemma of the later poem does not acknowledge the source of the paraphrase. Instead, it changes the representation from a mosaic into a picture by the celebrated painter Apelles.

It should be added that the ekphrasis of Constantine Manasses itself had certain points in common with a sixth-century description by the orator John of Gaza of a *tabula mundi*, which was painted in a bath house of his city. Both authors, for example, claim to have seen in the works of art various sea creatures, which they describe at length. They also both found the figure of Earth, personified as a woman.<sup>22</sup> The type of mosaic which Constantine Manasses describes is antique or Early Byzantine in date. Therefore the possibility that he may have used an earlier literary model cannot be excluded.<sup>23</sup>

The freedom with which written descriptions could be transferred from one work of art to another is particularly obvious in the case of inscriptions. At Tokalı Kilise, in Cappadocia, for example, the New Church contains a twenty-line verse which lists the subjects depicted in the fresco decoration. The catalogue is incorrect; it mentions scenes, such as the Feeding of the Multitude, which were not represented, and omits other important episodes, such as those of the Passion, which were shown. Presumably the inscription was borrowed from the decoration of some other church.<sup>24</sup> In manuscripts, inscriptions were copied from one book into another along with the illuminations. Sometimes the paintings were slightly altered in the process, while the inscriptions remained the same.<sup>25</sup>

There is, then, ample evidence that many Byzantine writers on art had little or no regard for accuracy, even when, as in the case of inscriptions, inaccuracy would be immediately apparent. But, in spite of this conclusion, it is possible for us to prove that some Byzantine authors did make original observations on works of art. The ekphraseis were not entirely the product of a dead literary tradition; they can also be shown to reflect contemporary changes and developments in the visual arts.

<sup>22</sup> John of Gaza's poem is found in P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius* (Leipzig, 1912), 135–64. For the description of Earth, see Part II, v. 7ff., and for the fishes, Part II, v. 79ff. The description of Earth in the ekphrasis of Constantine Manasses is lost, but it is recorded in the title and in the paraphrase by Manuel Melissenus, ed. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte," cols. 74, 80. For the sea creatures, see *ibid.*, cols. 77, line 145ff., and 78, line 196ff.

<sup>23</sup> Another ekphrasis which may have been based in part on an earlier source is the description of the mosaics in the Holy Apostles by Constantine the Rhodian; A. Salač, "Quelques épigrammes de l'Anthologie Palatine et l'iconographie byzantine," *Byzantinoslavica*, 12 (1951), 1ff., esp. 12f. But see also G. Downey, "Constantine the Rhodian: His Life and Writings," *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of A. M. Friend, Jr.*, ed. K. Weitzmann (Princeton, 1955), 212ff.

<sup>24</sup> G. de Jerphanion, *Une nouvelle province de l'art byzantin. Les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, I, 2 (Paris, 1932), 305f. Another Cappadocian example of a reused inscription is a description of Christ Calming the Storm in the church of the Holy Apostles at Sinassos, which had been written in the fourth century by Gregory Nazianzus, and which also appeared in the church of St. Basil in Caesarea; R. Cormack, "Byzantine Cappadocia: The Archaic Group of Wall-Paintings," *JBAA*, 30 (1967), 24.

<sup>25</sup> See I. Ševčenko, "The Anti-Iconoclastic Poem in the Pantocrator Psalter," *CahArch*, 15–16 (1965–66), 41.

The ekphraseis often give precise descriptions of the formal layout of scenes, and of the poses adopted by the figures. There are several such passages in the sixth-century ekphrasis written by Choricus on the mosaics of St. Sergius in Gaza. In his account of the Nativity scene, Choricus describes the Virgin as "... a maiden lying back on her bed with her left hand placed under her right elbow and resting her cheek on her right hand."<sup>26</sup> The Virgin is shown reclining in this posture in the Nativity scene represented on a phial in Monza (fig. 1). The phial probably dates to the sixth or early seventh century, and was brought to Italy with oil from Palestine.<sup>27</sup> In date and place of origin, therefore, it is close to the oration of Choricus. The Virgin is also shown sitting, with her hands in the positions described by Choricus, in the Nativity miniature of the Rabula Gospels (fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> This manuscript was written in 586 at the monastery of St. John of Zagba, in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

The Monza phials also provide parallels to the description given by Choricus of the Annunciation to the Shepherds. He writes: "Some of the shepherds seem to have no use for their staffs, but the staff of one shepherd, while it is not employed on his flock, serves as a support for one of his hands. He has raised his right hand, I should think in wonder at the cry."<sup>30</sup> On two of the phials at Monza one finds representations of shepherds resting their left hands on their staffs, and raising their right hands up toward the angels.<sup>31</sup>

The description given by Choricus of the mosaic in the main apse of St. Sergius makes an interesting comparison with surviving apse mosaics of the sixth century. According to Choricus, the apse contained in the center an image of the Virgin and Child, which was flanked by two groups of figures. On the far right stood the donor of the church: "He is asking the patron of the church, who is close by him, to receive the gift favorably; the other accedes, and looks on the man with a gentle gaze, placing his right hand upon one of his shoulders, and is clearly about to introduce him to the Virgin and her Child the Savior."<sup>32</sup> The general layout of the apse mosaic described by Choricus is similar to that of the cathedral of Parenzo, a work which was executed around the middle of the sixth century.<sup>33</sup> The Parenzo mosaic shows in the center the Virgin and Child, flanked by angels and saints. The donor, the Bishop Euphrasius, stands to the extreme right of the Virgin, accompanied by his young son. In the Parenzo mosaic the donor offers a model of the church directly to the Virgin and Child, and not, as in the apse

<sup>26</sup> ... κόρη πρὸς εὐνήν ἀναπίπτουσα τὴν μὲν λαϊάν ὑποθεῖσα τῷ τῆς ἑτέρας ἀγκῶνι, τῇ δεξιᾷ δὲ τὴν παρειάν ἐπικλίνουσα. *Laudatio Marc.*, I.51.

<sup>27</sup> A. Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1958), pl. VII (Monza 2).

<sup>28</sup> Florence, Laurenziana, Plut. I.56, fol. 4v; G. Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile* (Paris, 1916), 101 note 4.

<sup>29</sup> C. Cecchelli, G. Furlani, and M. Salmi, *The Rabula Gospels* (Lausanne, 1959), 9f.

<sup>30</sup> τοῖς μὲν αἱ καλαύροπες ἀχρεῖοι φαίνονται, τῷ δὲ πρὸς μὲν τὴν ποίμνην ἀργεῖ, θάτερα δὲ συμμαχεῖ τοῖν ἑροῖν· τὴν γὰρ δεξιάν ἀνασχών, ἐμοὶ δοκῶ, τεθαύμακε τὴν βοήν. *Laudatio Marc.*, I.53.

<sup>31</sup> Grabar, *Ampoules*, pls. II and VIII (Monza 1 and 3).

<sup>32</sup> οὗτος οὖν τοῦ νεῶ τὸν προστάτην ὄντα πλησίον εὐμενῶς δέξασθαι τὸ δῶρον αἰτεῖ, ὃ δὲ πείθεται καὶ γαληνῶ θεάματι τὸν ἄνδρα προσβλέπει τῶν ὤμων αὐτοῦ θάτερῳ τὴν δεξιάν ἐπικλίνων καὶ δῆλός ἐστιν αὐτίκα συστήσων αὐτὸν τῇ τε Παρθένῳ καὶ τῷ παιδί τῷ Σωτῆρι. *Laudatio Marc.*, I.29f.

<sup>33</sup> B. Molajoli, *La Basilica eufraiana di Parenzo* (Padua, 1943), 26f.; Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, 62 note 37.

described by Choricus, to a saint, who acts as an intermediary. For this detail one has to turn to sixth-century mosaics preserved in Rome. On the triumphal arch of the church of S. Lorenzo fuori le mura, which opened into the sixth-century apse, there is a mosaic of Christ enthroned and flanked by two groups of saints (fig. 3).<sup>34</sup> To the far right of Christ is the donor, Pope Pelagius II (578–90). He is introduced to Christ by the patron saint of the church, St. Lawrence.

A similar composition is to be found in the apse mosaic of SS. Cosma e Damiano, a church founded by Pope Felix IV between 526 and 530 (fig. 4).<sup>35</sup> Here the two martyrs are presented to Christ by SS. Peter and Paul, each of whom places a hand on the shoulder of his protégé, in the gesture described by Choricus.

There is, then, a considerable coincidence between the layout of the scenes as described by Choricus and as they are represented in contemporary works of art. Since we no longer have the mosaics of St. Sergius in Gaza before us, we cannot state categorically that Choricus gave an entirely accurate account of this particular monument. But his precise descriptions cannot have been inspired only by his knowledge of ancient authors. They must to some extent also have been due to his own observation of the mosaics.

The description of St. Sergius by Choricus is only one of a number of surviving ekphraseis which were produced by orators of the school at Gaza. Both John and Procopius of Gaza wrote descriptions of paintings. John gives an account of a *tabula mundi*, which, as we saw above, was a precursor of a twelfth-century ekphrasis by Constantine Manasses. Procopius, who was the instructor of Choricus, describes a painting of Phaedra and Hippolytus.<sup>36</sup> It is clear from both these ekphraseis that the authors had observed actual works of art, and did not follow only literary sources. John of Gaza, for example, seems to have been in doubt about the identification of some of the figures he saw in the *tabula mundi*.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it has been shown that the allegorical figures which John describes have close parallels in floor mosaics of the fourth to sixth centuries which have been discovered in Syria and Palestine.<sup>38</sup> In the ekphrasis of Procopius there is a description of four mythological scenes, which are said to have been represented in a strip on the architrave above a painted colonnade. The scenes are described in the wrong chronological order, as if Procopius started his description at the wrong end of the sequence. This seems to indicate that the ekphrasis follows the actual layout of a picture and does not depend on literary models.<sup>39</sup> Certain passages of the ekphrasis

<sup>34</sup> G. Matthiae, *Mosaici medioevali delle chiese di Roma* (Rome, 1967), 149f., pl. 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 135f., pl. 78.

<sup>36</sup> P. Friedländer, *Spätantiker Gemäldezyklus in Gaza. Des Prokopios von Gaza Ἐκφρασις Εἰκόνης*, ST, 89 (Vatican City, 1939).

<sup>37</sup> Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza* (*supra*, note 22), 214.

<sup>38</sup> G. Downey, "John of Gaza and the Mosaic of Ge and Karpoi," *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II (Princeton, 1938), 205ff.; G. M. A. Hanfmann, "The Seasons in John of Gaza's *Tabula Mundi*," *Latomus*, 3 (1939), 111ff.

<sup>39</sup> The scenes are described in this order: the lion hunt of Hippolytus; Theseus and the Minotaur; Ariadne gives Theseus the thread; Ariadne sees Theseus among the Athenian captives. Friedländer, *Spätantiker Gemäldezyklus in Gaza*, 102f.; Procopius, *Descriptio imaginis*, 4–7, ed. Friedländer, 6f.

seem to betray the artistic taste of the period in which Procopius writes. The description of the jewelry worn by Phaedra is a good example: "The mistress wears as much jewelry as is fitting for life in the house, necklaces and armbands, collars around the neck and rings on the ears. A golden head-band binds her head; it is surrounded by a row of Indian stones."<sup>40</sup> This bejeweled portrait of Phaedra calls to mind contemporary representations of Byzantine empresses, such as the ivories of an empress now in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum (fig. 5) and in the Museo Nazionale in Florence, or the celebrated mosaic portrait of Theodora in S. Vitale, Ravenna.<sup>41</sup> Mosaics which survive from the late antique period sometimes show mythological figures clothed in contemporary imperial dress. Weitzmann has noted a mosaic of Apollo and Daphne at Antioch in which the ardent god is arrayed in a purple chlamys and a pearl diadem.<sup>42</sup>

There is good evidence, then, that the ekphraseis of the school of Gaza were based as much on visual observations as on literary models. When we turn to the ekphraseis of the post-iconoclastic period, we can also prove that some authors, at least, looked at works of art for themselves, for they were aware of contemporary changes in iconography. For example, a brief epigram on a painting of the death of the Forty Martyrs, which was written in the first half of the eleventh century by the Byzantine poet Christopher of Mytilene, specifically describes a version of this scene which in all probability was first created in the Middle Byzantine period, that is, after the ninth century. According to tradition, the forty saints met their death by being exposed to freeze beside a lake in Lesser Armenia. Their sufferings are graphically illustrated in two famous ivories, now at Leningrad and Berlin.<sup>43</sup> On each ivory, the naked martyrs are carved in various contorted poses, no two of which seem to be alike (fig. 6). These ivories are usually assigned to the tenth century, although later dates have been proposed.<sup>44</sup> A less accomplished rendering of the scene is to be found amongst the earlier frescoes in the church of Asinou, in Cyprus, which date to 1106.<sup>45</sup> In the Asinou version, too, the martyrs adopt a variety of different poses.

These images are exceptional amongst Byzantine scenes of martyrdom for the violent attitudes shown by the victims. There was, indeed, another, less tortured version of the Forty Martyrs' death, in which each saint was represented alike, in a rigid orant posture. This version of the scene is the only

<sup>40</sup> τοσοῦτον γὰρ ἡ κεκτημένη περίκειται κόσμον, ὅσον τῇ κατ'οἶκον ἀρμόσει διαίτη, ἀμφιδέτας τε καὶ περιβραχιόνια· ὁμοί τε περὶ τῇ δέρῃ καὶ τοῖς ὤσιν ἐλικτήρες καὶ χρυσῇ ταινίᾳ τὴν κεφαλὴν περισφίγουσα Ἰνδικῶν λίθων διαδοχῇ περικλείεται. *Descriptio imaginis*, 22, ed. Friedländer, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Friedländer, *Spätantiker Gemäldezyklus in Gaza*, 52 ff.; F. W. Deichmann, *Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna* (Baden-Baden, 1958), pl. 360; Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 36 and pl. 63.

<sup>42</sup> K. Weitzmann, "The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art," *DOP*, 14 (1960), 52, fig. 12.

<sup>43</sup> A. Goldschmidt and K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, II (Berlin, 1934), pl. 3, nos. 9, 10.

<sup>44</sup> J. Beckwith, *The Art of Constantinople* (London, 1961), 136 f.

<sup>45</sup> D. C. Winfield and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Church of Our Lady at Asinou, Cyprus," *DOP*, 21 (1967), 261 ff., fig. 9.

one known to have existed before the iconoclastic controversy, and is best represented by two frescoes in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome (fig. 7).<sup>46</sup> It is probable that the version of the martyrdom represented by the Leningrad and Berlin ivories was not created until the Macedonian Renaissance of the tenth century. The contorted figures seem to have been borrowed from several other scenes. Some figures may have migrated from portrayals of the Deposition, of Souls in Torment, and of John Baptizing the People, subjects which had been rare or unknown in the pre-iconoclastic period.<sup>47</sup> Other poses came from classical scenes, which we know to have survived into the tenth century, as they appear in contemporary manuscript illumination.<sup>48</sup>

Christopher of Mytilene's epigram stresses the variety of the martyrs' poses: "See the victorious Forty of God here, standing by the lake, each one in another posture. But if they are not alike in their postures, in the trial by frost they have one mind."<sup>49</sup> Thus the poem refers to what was probably a comparatively recent development in Byzantine iconography.

The most important ekphrasis which survives from the post-iconoclastic period is that devoted by Mesarites to the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Nikolaos Mesarites was born in 1163 or 1164 in Constantinople. It has been deduced from internal evidence that his description of the church of the Holy Apostles was written between 1198 and 1203. In this period, in 1201, he is recorded as sacristan of the churches in the Great Palace of the Emperors in Constantinople, and he had a judicial appointment at the cathedral of St. Sophia.<sup>50</sup> His ekphrasis on the Holy Apostles is of particular interest for two reasons. First, it is one of the longest and most elaborate Byzantine examples of this genre which survives. Second, it describes an important building and a cycle of mosaics which have completely disappeared, and which are accessible only, if at all, through written documents and through a few manuscript illuminations.

The first church of the Apostles seems to have been built in the fourth century by Constantius. It was rebuilt by Justinian before A.D. 550 as a cruciform structure with five domes—one dome over each arm and one over the crossing. Justinian's church was destroyed after the Turkish conquest to make way for the Fatih mosque of Mehmet the Conqueror, which now

<sup>46</sup> It is also known from a fresco at Syracuse. See O. Demus, "Two Palaeologan Mosaic Icons in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection," *DOP*, 14 (1960), 87ff., esp. 101f.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 106f. The motif of an older martyr holding up the slumped body of a younger companion recalls Joseph holding up the dead body of Christ. Compare the Leningrad and Berlin ivories of the Forty Martyrs especially with the miniature in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, gr. 74, fol. 100 (H. Omont, *Evangelies avec peintures byzantines du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Paris, n.d.], pl. 88). The martyrs who hug their chests with their arms and droop their heads are similar to the souls in torment depicted in Paris. gr. 74, fol. 51v (*ibid.*, pl. 41) and in Vat. gr. 394, fol. 12v (J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* [Princeton, 1954], fig. 73).

<sup>48</sup> Weitzmann, "The Survival of Mythological Representations," 64f.

<sup>49</sup> [Ἀφρὶ ἀγλο]φόρους Θεοῦ ἐνθάδε τεσσαράκοντα σχήματι ἄλλον ἐν ἄλλῳ ἐφεσταότας κατὰ λίμνην· [εἰ δ' ἄρ]α καὶ ἐν σχήμασιν οἶδε μὴ εἶεν ὅμοιοι, ἐν βασάνῳ παγέτοιο ὁμόφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσιν. E. Kurtz ed., *Die Gedichte des Christophoros Mitylenaios* (Leipzig, 1903), 90, no. 133. The title reads: [Εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους] τεσσαράκοντα ἐν διαλλάττουσι σχήμασι ζωγραφηθέντας.

<sup>50</sup> G. Downey, "Nikolaos Mesarites: Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople," *TAPS*, N. S., 47, 6 (1957), 859.

stands on its site.<sup>51</sup> Like the cathedral of Saint Sophia, the Holy Apostles had to undergo several repairs and alterations in the course of its existence. One chronicler, Theophanes, says that Justinian's successor, the Emperor Justin II, "added adornment" to the church.<sup>52</sup> A major repair is recorded in the ninth century, when the Emperor Basil I, according to his grandson Constantine VII, buttressed the structure and, as Constantine put it, "... stripped off its old age, and took off its wrinkles. . . ."<sup>53</sup> The phrase "stripped off its old age" may suggest a renewal of the decoration on the walls in the ninth century, but perhaps we should not put too much weight on it, as it is a stock quotation from the *Iliad*.<sup>54</sup> The church was restored again by Andronicus II at around 1300, but was apparently already in a ruinous condition before Constantinople fell to the Turks.<sup>55</sup>

In his ekphrasis of around the year 1200 Mesarites tells us that he is the first to describe the church.<sup>56</sup> This was far from the truth, as the Justinianic building had already been described twice; first, by the historian Procopius, before 560, and then again by the poet Constantine the Rhodian, between 931 and 944. Procopius gives a relatively short description of the building, and makes no mention of mosaics.<sup>57</sup> Constantine the Rhodian's tenth-century account is longer, and it portrays the mosaics in some detail.<sup>58</sup> However, the selections of scenes made by Constantine and Mesarites do not always coincide.

The major puzzle which has been posed by the mosaics of the Holy Apostles is their date. Heisenberg, who published the first edition of the text of Mesarites in 1908, believed that the mosaics were sixth century.<sup>59</sup> Since his book appeared, several writers have questioned this early dating, and it is now apparent that some of the mosaics, at least, must have dated to the twelfth century. Of course, there is no reason to suppose that all the mosaics seen by Mesarites dated to the same period—just as the mosaics at Saint Sophia do not all date to one time. The church of the Holy Apostles was large, and it was more than once repaired. Its mosaics may well have been added or restored piecemeal. The evidence for the post-iconoclastic date for at least some of them comes both from texts and from extant works of art. The textual evidence primarily concerns the artist Eulalios. A marginal note on the thirteenth-century manuscript of Mesarites tells us that the artist of the mosaic of the Marys at the Tomb was called Eulalios, and according to Mesarites the artist

<sup>51</sup> R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin*. Part I, *Le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat œcuménique*: vol. III, *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris, 1953), 47f.

<sup>52</sup> ἐπεκόσμησε τὰς ἐκκλησίας τὰς κτισθείσας ὑπὸ Ἰουστινιανοῦ, τὴν τε μεγάλην ἐκκλησίαν καὶ τοὺς ἁγίους ἀποστόλους . . . . Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, I (Leipzig, 1883), 242.

<sup>53</sup> . . . καὶ ἀποξέσας τὸ ἀπὸ χρόνου γῆρας καὶ τὰς ρυτίδας περιελών . . . . Theophanes Continuatus, PG, 109, col. 337D.

<sup>54</sup> *Iliad*, IX, v. 445f.

<sup>55</sup> Janin, *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> XII.12, ed. Downey (*supra*, note 50).

<sup>57</sup> *De aedificiis*, I.4.9–24.

<sup>58</sup> Ed. E. Legrand, in "Description des œuvres d'art et de l'église des Saints-Apôtres de Constantinople: poème en vers iambiques par Constantin le Rhodien," *REG*, 9 (1896), 36–65.

<sup>59</sup> Heisenberg, *Grabeskirche und Apostelkirche*, II (*supra*, note 2); *idem*, "Die Zeit des byzantinischen Malers Eulalios," *PhW*, 41 (1921), 1024ff.

portrayed himself in the mosaic.<sup>60</sup> In addition, a late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century epigram by Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos ascribes the Christ Pantocrator mosaic in the central dome of the Holy Apostles to this same artist Eulalios.<sup>61</sup> A group of twelfth-century poems by Theodorus Prodromus strongly suggest, if they do not conclusively prove, that a Eulalios was a contemporary of the poet.<sup>62</sup>

The visual evidence for the late date of the mosaics comes from the parallels between the descriptions of Mesarites and tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-century works of art.<sup>63</sup> Scholars disagreeing with Heisenberg have pointed out that on several occasions Mesarites describes features in the mosaics which are not known in Byzantine art before the tenth century. These parallels have a double significance. They prove the late date of the mosaics, and also the spontaneity of Mesarites' observations. Unlike John Phocas, he was not copying a sixth-century literary model.

We may look first at the description in Mesarites of the Transfiguration mosaic. Here he depicts in detail the poses of the three astounded Apostles who witness the event. "Peter, the most vehement, springing up from the ground, since he could . . . seemed to speak words . . . . James, partly rising with difficulty on his knee, and supporting his still heavy head with his left arm, still has the greater part of his body nailed to the ground, while his right hand he holds closely to his eyes . . . . John however does not wish to look up at all, but . . . seems to lie there in deep sleep . . . ."<sup>64</sup> These distinctions between the poses of Peter, James, and John are characteristic of Middle Byzantine representations of the Transfiguration. One finds the distinctions already tentatively expressed in a miniature of a Paris Gregory manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale, gr. 510, fol. 75), which was produced in Constantinople probably between 880 and 883 (fig. 8).<sup>65</sup> Here we find Peter, on the left, boldly standing to address Christ, while James rises on one knee, and lifts his hand as if to shield his face. John adopts a stooping posture and looks down toward the ground. In later Byzantine representations of the scene the attitudes of the Apostles correspond in more detail with the description of

<sup>60</sup> XXVIII.23, ed. Downey.

<sup>61</sup> A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, Νικηφόρος Κάλλιστος Ξανθόπουλος, *BZ*, 11 (1902), 46, no. 14.

<sup>62</sup> N. A. Bees, "Kunstgeschichtliche Untersuchungen über die Eulaliosfrage und den Mosaikschmuck der Apostelkirche," *RepKunstw*, 39 (1916), 97ff. and 231ff.; and 40 (1917), 59ff., provides the documentary evidence to date the artist Eulalios in the twelfth century; A. Salač, "Quelques épi-grammes de l'Anthologie Palatine et l'iconographie byzantine," *Byzantinoslavica*, 12 (1951), 1ff., esp. 12f., draws attention to discrepancies between the descriptions of Constantine the Rhodian and Mesarites, which may indicate that the mosaics were altered between 931 and 1203. The relevant texts have now been collected and translated by Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 229ff.

<sup>63</sup> See especially N. Malickij, "Remarques sur la date des mosaïques de l'église des Saints-Apôtres à Constantinople décrites par Mesarites," *Byzantion*, 3 (1926), 123ff.

<sup>64</sup> ὁ μὲν συντονώτατος Πέτρος τῆς γῆς ὡς εἶχεν ἐξαναστάς . . . ἐδόκει φθέγγεσθαι ῥήματα . . . Ἰάκωβος μάλιστα ἐπὶ γόνυ διαναστάς καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν βεβαρημένην ἔτι τυγχάνουσιν τῷ εὐωνύμῳ διαβαστάσας βραχίονι τῷ μὲν πλείστῳ μέρει τοῦ σώματος προσήλωται πάλιν τῇ γῇ, τῇ δεξιᾷ δὲ χειρὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς πυκνὰ καταψᾶ . . . Ἰωάννης δὲ τὸ παράπαν οὐδ' ἀνανεῦσαι βεβούληται, ἀλλὰ . . . βαθεῶς ἔγαν ὑπνώπτειν ἐν τούτῳ δοκεῖ . . . XVI.3f., ed. Downey. I am indebted to Professor Downey for permission to quote from his translation.

<sup>65</sup> On the date, see S. Der Nersessian, "The Illustrations of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus," *DOP*, 16 (1962), 197.



Mesarites. A mosaic in the cathedral of Monreale, for example, which probably dates to around 1180, shows St. John crouching on the ground, with his head lowered, as if in illustration of the words of Mesarites, "John however does not wish to look up at all, but . . . seems to lie there in deep sleep. . . ." (fig. 9),<sup>66</sup> and a twelfth-century illustration in a lectionary preserved on Mount Athos (Ivion, MS 1, fol. 305<sup>v</sup>) shows St. James, in the phrase of Mesarites, "supporting his head with his left arm," as he rises from the ground (fig. 10).<sup>67</sup>

These Middle Byzantine Transfiguration scenes may be contrasted with the outstanding pre-iconoclastic example, the Justinianic sixth-century mosaic in the apse of St. Catherine's church on Mt. Sinai (fig. 11). The Apostles here are labeled, and we find that it is St. Peter who is depicted lying on the ground, below the figure of Christ. James and John are shown kneeling on each side, in entirely symmetrical poses. There is not yet the differentiation between the attitudes of each of the three Apostles that was to appear in post-iconoclastic versions of the Transfiguration, nor does this distinction between each of the Apostles appear in any other surviving Transfiguration scene made prior to the ninth century.

Here, then, Mesarites says something that could not have been said in the sixth century. One might even go further, and say that he could not have composed his account before the twelfth century, for it is only in this century that we begin to find the Apostles in the precise poses which Mesarites describes.

The description of the mosaic of the Miraculous Draught of Fish provides a different kind of evidence that Mesarites based some of his remarks on his own observation of the mosaics, and not merely on literary sources. For here he has been ruled by the iconography of the mosaic, to the extent that he alters the sequence of the Gospel story. Millet demonstrated this by comparing the account in Mesarites with the fresco in the Mirož monastery at Pskov, which dates to shortly before 1156 (fig. 12).<sup>68</sup> In the Pskov fresco we see on the left the boat with the disciples casting their net, in accordance with the instructions of Christ (John 21:6); then we see Peter in the water, swimming toward the shore (verse 7). The figures on the right illustrate the next two episodes of the story. First, Peter is represented going back to the boat, and pulling the net full of fish to land (verse 11), then on the right, the Lord feeds the fish and bread to the assembled disciples (verse 13). It is clear from the description in Mesarites that the mosaic which he saw in the Holy Apostles resembled this fresco quite closely. First, he describes the Savior commanding the disciples to cast their net over the side of the boat, then Peter swimming toward Christ. After this, Mesarites describes the feeding of the disciples

<sup>66</sup> Artists from Constantinople probably worked at Monreale; E. Kitzinger, *The Mosaics of Monreale* (Palermo, 1960), 75f.

<sup>67</sup> The comparison was made by K. Weitzmann, "The Narrative and Liturgical Gospel Illustrations," *New Testament Manuscript Studies*, ed. M. M. Parvis and A. P. Wikgren (Chicago, 1950), 164f.; reprinted in *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination*, ed. H. L. Kessler (Chicago, 1971), 261, fig. 249; for the date of the manuscript, see V. Lazarev, *Storia della pittura bizantina* (Turin, 1967), 252 note 51.

<sup>68</sup> Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile* (*supra*, note 28), 574.

(verse 13). Finally, he turns to the figure of Peter with the net (verse 11), and says: "But Peter alone, since, I suppose, he received his food from the hands of the Lord before the others, . . . turns again, like a man eager for activity and mindful of his work, and draws up the net from the sea, bracing himself with his feet and grasping with his hands the fishing net, which is completely full of great fish . . ."<sup>69</sup> Mesarites goes on to give us his reason for considering the disciples' eating and Peter's hauling of the net as contemporaneous actions, when a reading of the Bible would suggest that Peter first finished hauling in the net, and only then received food from the Lord: "And Peter turns his head toward his companions and fellow-workers, calling to them, I suppose, to lay hold along with him and drag the net out to dry ground, since he alone has not the strength to draw it out easily himself . . ."<sup>70</sup> It was, therefore, Peter turning his head toward the next scene, the Feeding of the Disciples, that made Mesarites alter the biblical sequence of events. In the Pskov fresco Peter turns toward his companions in just the manner described by Mesarites. Here again, we must conclude that the description of Mesarites is based on visual rather than literary data.

To this point I have considered only cases of simple description; I have not yet touched upon the problem of the attitudes toward art displayed in Mesarites's ekphrasis. It remains to decide whether all these attitudes are the stereotyped responses of antique rhetoric, or whether there is something new, and only appropriate to post-iconoclastic Byzantine art. In one passage Mesarites shows awareness of one of the most important distinctions between the aesthetics of post-iconoclastic art and that of the Christian art of preceding centuries. In his description of the pose of Christ in the mosaic portraying the Incredulity of Thomas, Mesarites writes that, as the Apostle stretches out his hand to touch Christ's side, "the Savior . . . depicts in His posture the wounded man, and bends over and seems almost, so to speak, to fear the touching of the scar. The hand of Thomas enters in at the side of the Savior like some spear stretched out far and pressed against an unresisting body . . . The side seems to shrink from Thomas's continued handling of it, and wishes to pour forth blood and water again . . ."<sup>71</sup>

This description of Christ's attitude corresponds with a number of Late Byzantine depictions of the Incredulity of Thomas. In the thirteenth-century fresco at Sopoćani in Yugoslavia, for example, Christ inclines his head sharply toward Thomas, so that he appears to be bending his body away from the Apostle's touch (fig. 13). An icon of the fourteenth century, which is now in the

<sup>69</sup> Πέτρος δὲ μόνος, ὡς οἶμαι πρὸ πάντων λαβὼν ἐκ τῶν δεσποτικῶν χειρῶν τὴν τροφήν . . . ἀγωνιστικὸς ὥσπερ εἰ τις καὶ ἔμφροντις ἔργου καὶ πάλιν ἔχεται καὶ τῆς θαλάττης ἀνέλκει τὸ δίκτυον, τοῖς μὲν ποσὶν ἀντιβαίνων πρὸς ἑαυτὸν, ταῖς δὲ χερσὶ τῆς ἰχθυόγρας ἐπειλημμένος, πληρεστάτης οὖσης ἰχθύων μεγάλων . . . XXXVI.4, ed. Downey.

<sup>70</sup> στρέφει δὲ Πέτρος τὴν κεφαλὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ συμμύστας καὶ ὁμοτέχνους, προσκαλούμενος οἶμαι τούτους ἐφάπασθαι οἱ τῆς τοῦ δικτύου πρὸς τὴν ξηρὰν ἐξολκῆς τῷ μὴ δεδυνῆσθαι μόνος τοῦτο ῥαγότερον ἐξελεῖσθαι . . . XXXVI.5, ed. Downey.

<sup>71</sup> ὁ δὲ σωτὴρ ἐσχηματισμένος τὸν τραυματίαν καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν συνιζάνων καὶ περὶ τὴν τῆς ὤτειλῆς ἀνασκάλευσιν οἷον εἰπεῖν δεδιττόμενος. Εἰσδύνει περὶ τὴν τοῦ σωτῆρος πλευρὰν ἢ χεῖρ τοῦ Θωμᾶ καθαπερὶ τις λόγχη μακρόθεν ἐκτεταμένη καὶ πρὸς σῶμα ἐπεραιομένη εὐένδοτον . . . Ἡ δὲ πλευρὰ οἷον ἀποθλιβομένη ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Θωμᾶ συγχῆς ἐπαφῆς καὶ πάλιν αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ ῥεῦσαι βεβούληται . . . XXXIV.5-7, ed. Downey.

monastery of the Transfiguration in the Meteora in Greece, is a still clearer illustration of the text of the ekphrasis (fig. 14). Here the Lord bends his whole body sharply, drawing his side away from Thomas' hand, in a manner which appears to fit closely the description by Mesarites.<sup>72</sup>

Among the surviving Byzantine portrayals of this scene which antedate the ekphrasis of Mesarites, there are no instances in which Christ assumes just this posture. Generally Christ stands straight upright, as in the eleventh-century mosaic from Hosios Loukas in Greece.<sup>73</sup> It is very likely, however, that the iconographical type of the Meteora icon and the Sopoćani fresco existed in Byzantine art before 1200, even if no examples of it have survived to this day. First, we have the evidence of a miniature in a late twelfth-century Coptic Gospel book, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (copte 13, fol. 278v; fig. 15). It shows Christ supporting himself by laying his right arm over Thomas' shoulders; at the same time he seems to be trying to draw his side away from the Apostle's touch, and thus stands at what appears to be a somewhat awkward angle.<sup>74</sup> It is probable that this Coptic miniature is a copy of a more elegant Byzantine model. There is also the evidence of a tenth-century ivory, which is at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington (fig. 16). Here Christ is turning his side away from Thomas' touch, and at the same time he inclines his head toward the Apostle. Thus, we have the same elements in the tenth-century ivory which appeared, vastly exaggerated, in the fourteenth-century icon. These examples allow us to conclude that the mosaic in the Holy Apostles which Mesarites described showed Christ with the upper part of his body bending down, and his side curving away from Thomas' hand.

In his description Mesarites says that Christ "depicts in his posture the wounded man," and that the "hand of Thomas enters" his side "like a spear," and that the side of Christ "wishes to pour forth blood and water." Clearly Mesarites is making a visual comparison between the pose of Christ showing his wound, and that of Christ receiving his wound on the cross. This comparison is appropriate only to post-iconoclastic Crucifixion scenes, because only in this period did artists depict the crucified Christ as a wounded man, with his body bent and slumping on the cross. On some occasions pre-iconoclastic artists showed Christ inclining his head slightly, as in the miniature from the Syrian Rabula gospels of the sixth century (fig. 17). But here, as in all other pre-iconoclastic examples of the Crucifixion, Christ's body is erect. It is an image which emphasizes Christ's triumph over death, rather than his suffering humanity. The earliest surviving Byzantine work of art from the milieu of the capital which portrayed Christ on the cross as a dead man seems to belong to the ninth century. In a monastic psalter in the Pantocrator monastery on Mount Athos (codex 61, fol. 98) there is a miniature which

<sup>72</sup> K. Kreidl-Papadopoulos, "Die Ikonen im Kunsthistorischen Museum in Wien," *JbKsWien*, 66 (1970), 55, fig. 37.

<sup>73</sup> E. Diez and O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), fig. 10.

<sup>74</sup> Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Évangile*, 578, fig. 631.

depicts Christ on the cross, with his eyes closed.<sup>75</sup> Here, as well as in all other surviving ninth-century Crucifixion scenes, Christ's body is still upright. But by the second half of the tenth century, Byzantine ivory carvers were depicting Christ with his whole body sagging.<sup>76</sup> In the eleventh- and twelfth-century Crucifixion scenes, such as the famous mosaic at Hosios Loukas, the curve of the body becomes more pronounced (fig. 18). Only an image of this type, with Christ's body sinking down and his side curved, would fit the description which Mesarites gives us of Christ's posture in the mosaic of the Incredulity of Thomas. When Mesarites, in describing the Incredulity of Thomas, visually recalled Christ's posture in the Crucifixion, he must have had in mind Crucifixion scenes of the post-iconoclastic type, dating to the tenth century or later. This passage of his ekphrasis, therefore, shows an appreciation of one of the most important innovations of Middle Byzantine art, the portrayal of Christ suffering on the cross as a man.

The passages which I have quoted demonstrate that the ekphraseis were often accurate and in touch with contemporary developments in art. There was more in them than a dead literary tradition. They reflected not only changes in iconography, but also the new attitudes which lay behind the changes. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the literary element was strong. Before we can fully assess the ekphraseis as evidence for art history, we will have to look deeper into their literary aspects and identify common quotations and conceits in order to find out how the use of *topoi* affected the validity of Byzantine writing on art.

## II. THE USE OF *TOPOI* AND THEIR EFFECT ON ACCURACY

From antiquity to the fifteenth century the ekphraseis devoted to works of art formed a continuous tradition in Greek literature.<sup>77</sup> Nearly all of them, to some extent, copied each other; there is no need to look further than the introductions of the ekphraseis to find examples of repetition. The prefaces often explain the author's purpose in writing the description, and contain general observations on the visual arts. The innocent reader might hope that they would give a picture of changing attitudes toward art throughout the centuries. Unfortunately, they are completely stereotyped. Thus, in the twelfth century, Constantine Manasses prefaces his ekphrasis on a mosaic in the Great Palace at Constantinople with the statement that painting is superior

<sup>75</sup> J. R. Martin, "The Dead Christ on the Cross in Byzantine Art," *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, 189ff., pl. 23, 4. The earlier examples from Sinai have been discussed by H. Belting and C. Belting-Ihm, "Das Kreuzbild im 'Hodegos' des Anastasios Sinaites," *Tortulae. Studien zu altchristlichen und byzantinischen Monumenten*, ed. W. N. Schumacher (Rome, 1966), 30ff.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pl. 39, no. 101.

<sup>77</sup> On the ekphrasis as a literary form, see L. Méridier, *L'influence de la seconde sophistique sur l'œuvre de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris, 1906), 41ff.; G. Downey, "Ekphrasis," *RAC*, IV (1959), 921ff.; G. Pfohl, "Monument und Epigramm," *75 Jahre Neues Gymnasium Nürnberg, Festschrift* (Würzburg, 1964), 1ff.; A. Hohlweg, "Ekphrasis," *RBK*, II (Stuttgart, 1971), col. 33ff.; Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (*supra*, note 6), 78f.

to sculpture. Unlike the sculptor, the painter can reproduce color and shade, and is thus able to portray "... the roughness of skin and every kind of complexion, a blush, blond hair, a face that is dark, faint, and gloomy, and again one that is sweet, comely, and radiant with beauty. ..." <sup>78</sup> This passage is inspired by the ekphrasis of the third-century sophist Philostratus the Elder. In the introduction to his *Imagines* there is a similar passage on the superiority of painting to sculpture, in which the painter's ability to reproduce shade and color is extolled. The painter, says Philostratus, can imitate the look of a man who is mad, suffering, or joyful. He can differentiate between eyes of different colors, and likewise with hair and clothing. <sup>79</sup> The opinions of Philostratus the Elder on this subject were repeated in the introduction of his grandson's ekphrasis. <sup>80</sup>

The untrustworthiness of the statements which preface the ekphraseis is demonstrated by a remark which I have noted in the introduction to Mesarites' description of the interior of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Mesarites, writing around the year 1200, declares that he is the first to describe the church, even though both Procopius and Constantine the Rhodian had already written on the building, the former in the sixth and the latter in the tenth century. Furthermore, Constantine the Rhodian had made the same claim, saying that he was the first to speak on the church. <sup>81</sup>

When the reader of an ekphrasis passes from the introduction to the description itself, he will usually find a large number of *topoi* which are variations on one theme, the realism of the work of art. The author may, for example, declare that the art is so realistic that he has forgotten it is art and not real action. The third-century sophist Philostratus the Elder, describing a painting of a boar hunt, claims, "I was carried away by the painting, thinking that the figures were not painted, but existed and moved. ..." <sup>82</sup>

The same remark is made by Procopius of Gaza, in the late fifth or early sixth century, in the course of his description of a painting of Phaedra. <sup>83</sup> And the Byzantine writer Mesarites, describing the mosaics in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, twice reminds us that "the events that we now observe are not real life, but a picture." <sup>84</sup>

This sentiment reflects a tendency in the ekphraseis for the authors to go beyond the works of art themselves, to a fuller narration of the stories which inspired them. The first example of this technique in Greek literature is

<sup>78</sup> ... τραχύτητα δέρματος και χρώαν παντοδαπῇ ἐρύθειν τε και κόμην ξανθὴν και πρόσωπον καπνηρόν και ὠρακιὸν και στυγνὸν και αὔθις ἡδὺ και χάριεν και στίλβον τῷ κάλλει .... Ed. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte" (*supra*, note 16), col. 75, line 16 ff.

<sup>79</sup> *Imagines*, I.2.

<sup>80</sup> *Imagines*, Prooemium 3. This *topos* also appears in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci; ed. H. Ludwig, *Das Buch von der Malerei*, I (Vienna, 1882), part I, 38.

<sup>81</sup> XII.12, ed. Downey, and *ibid.*, p. 860; ed. Legrand "Description" (*supra*, note 58), v. 412; Procopius, *De aedificiis*, I.4.9f.

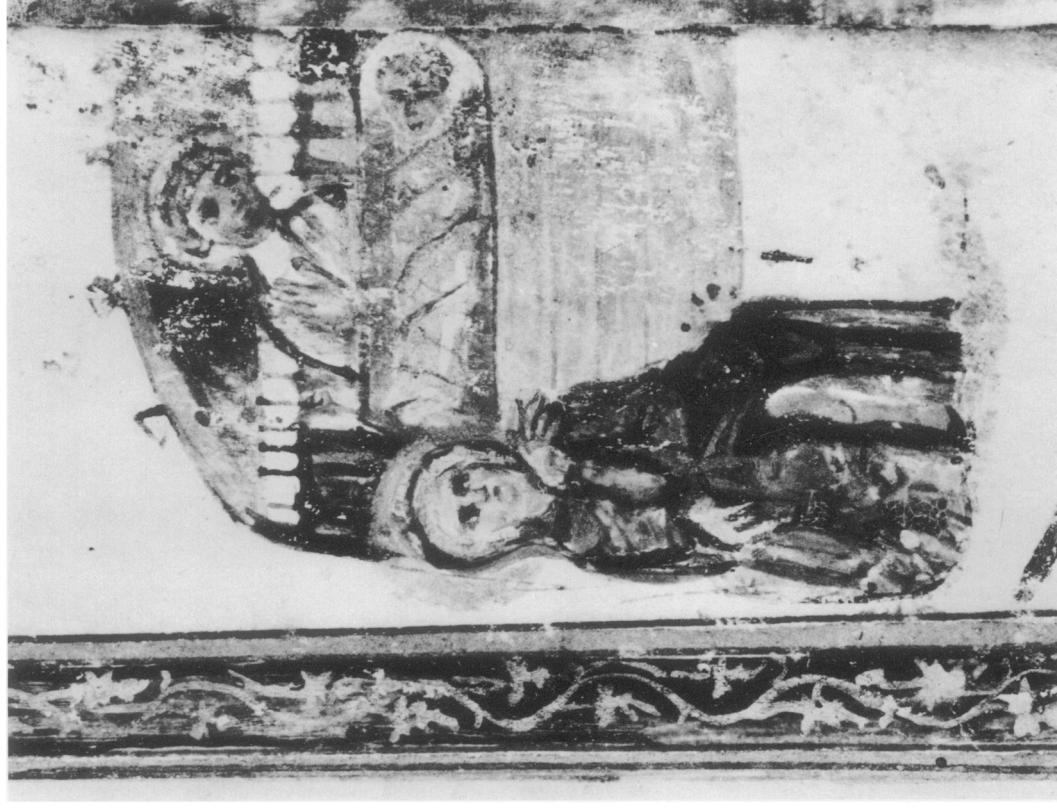
<sup>82</sup> ἐξήχθην ὑπὸ τῆς γραφῆς μὴ γεγράφθαι δοκῶν αὐτούς, εἶναι δὲ και κινεῖσθαι .... Philostratus, *Imagines*, I.28.2.

<sup>83</sup> *Descriptio imaginis*, 17, line 163f., ed. Friedländer (*supra*, note 36).

<sup>84</sup> οὐ γὰρ ἐν πράγμασιν ἀλλ' ἐν γράμμασι τὰ νῦν πρὸς ἡμῶν καθορώμενα. XXX.2 and XXXIV.8, ed. Downey.



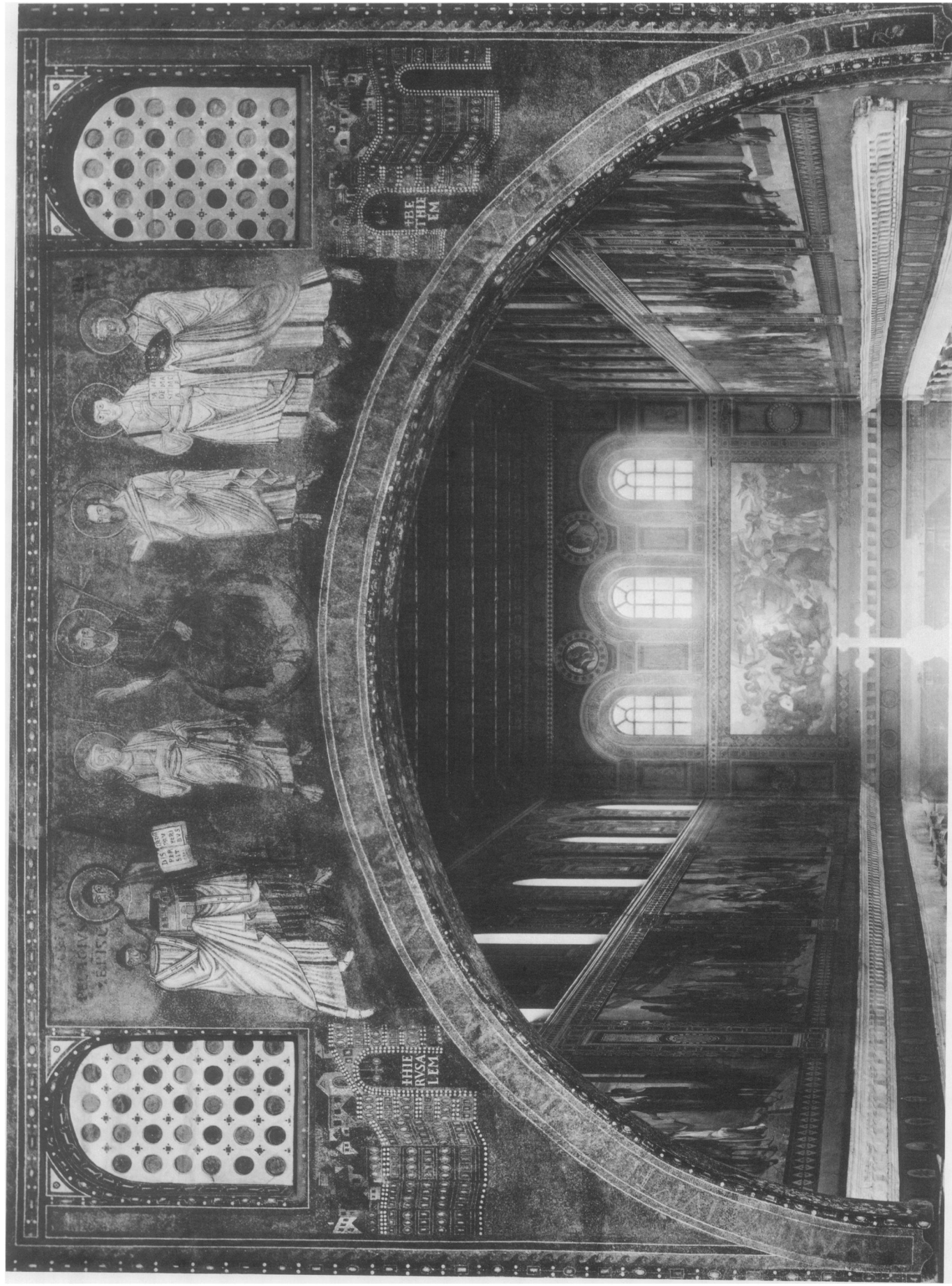
1. Monza, Cathedral. Phial



2. Florence, Bibl. Laurenz., Plut. I.56, Detail

The Nativity

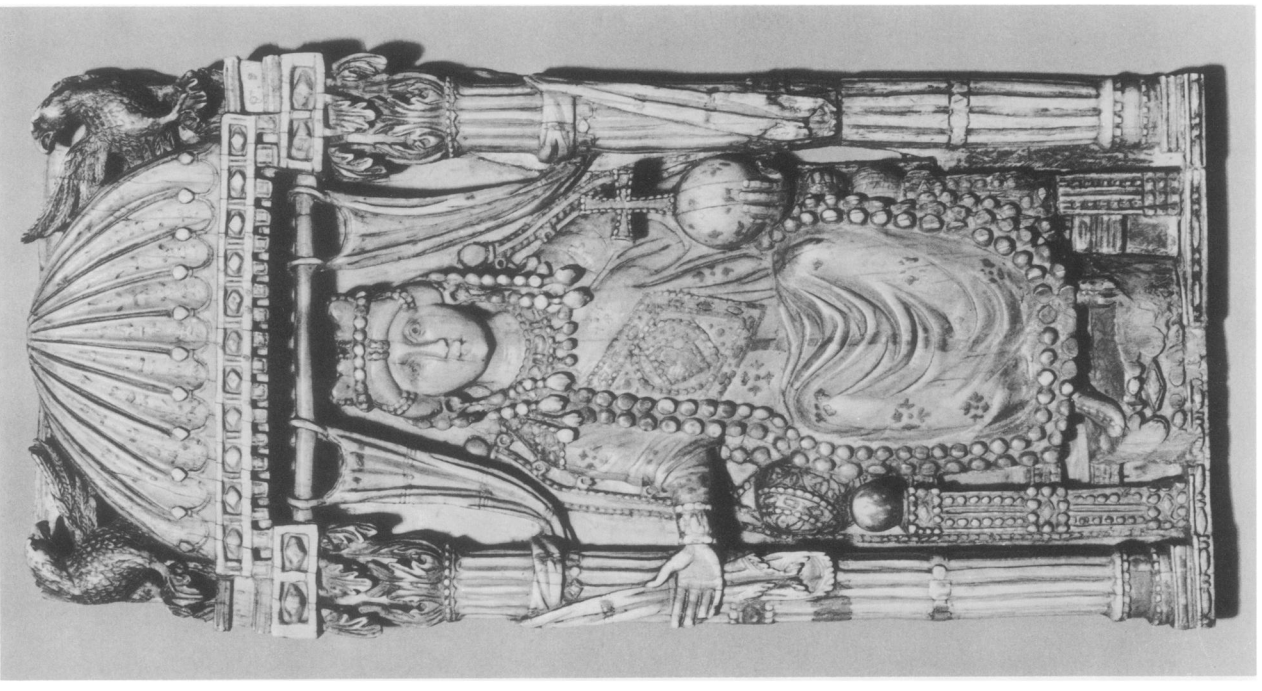




3. Rome, S. Lorenzo fuori le mura, Triumphal Arch



4. Rome, SS. Cosma e Damiano, Apse



5. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.  
Ivory of an Empress

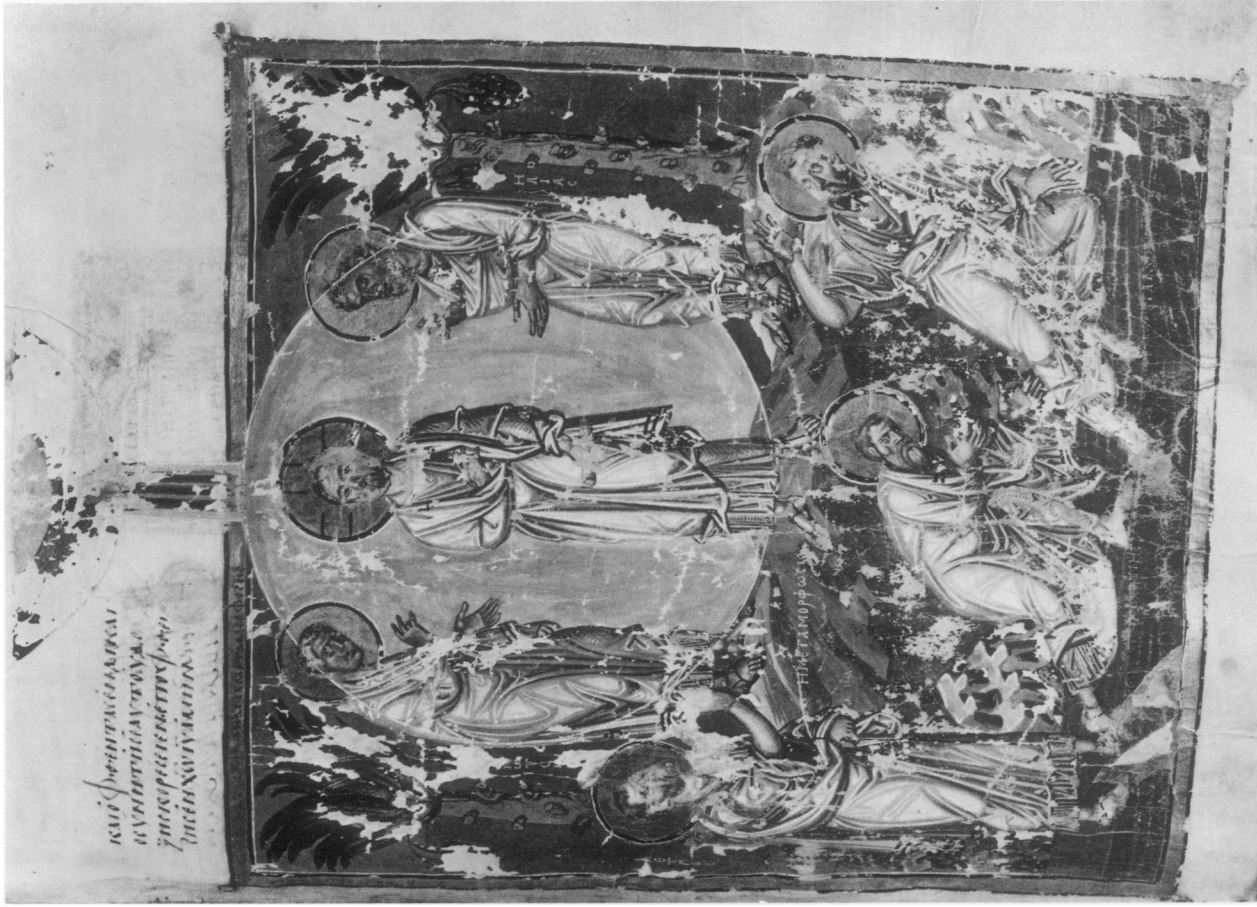




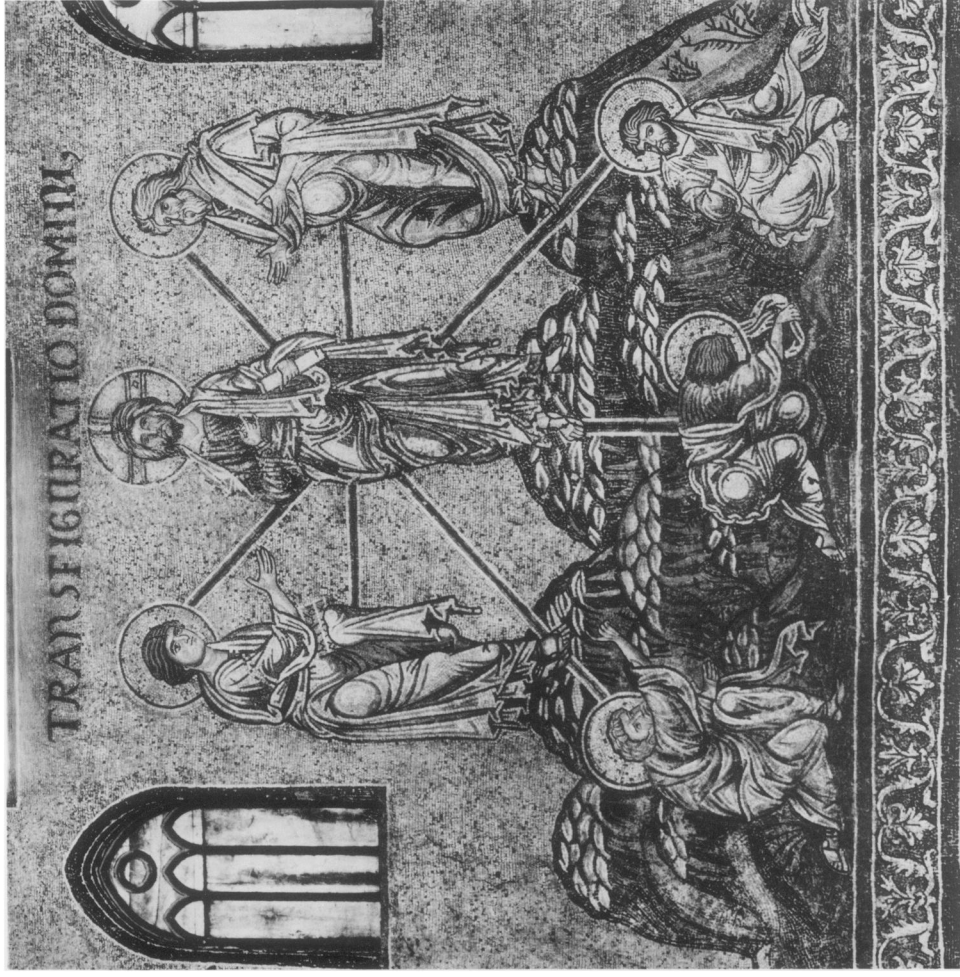
6. Berlin, Ehemals Staatliche Museen. Ivory of the Forty Martyrs



7. Rome, S. Maria Antiqua, Chapel of the Forty Martyrs, Apse



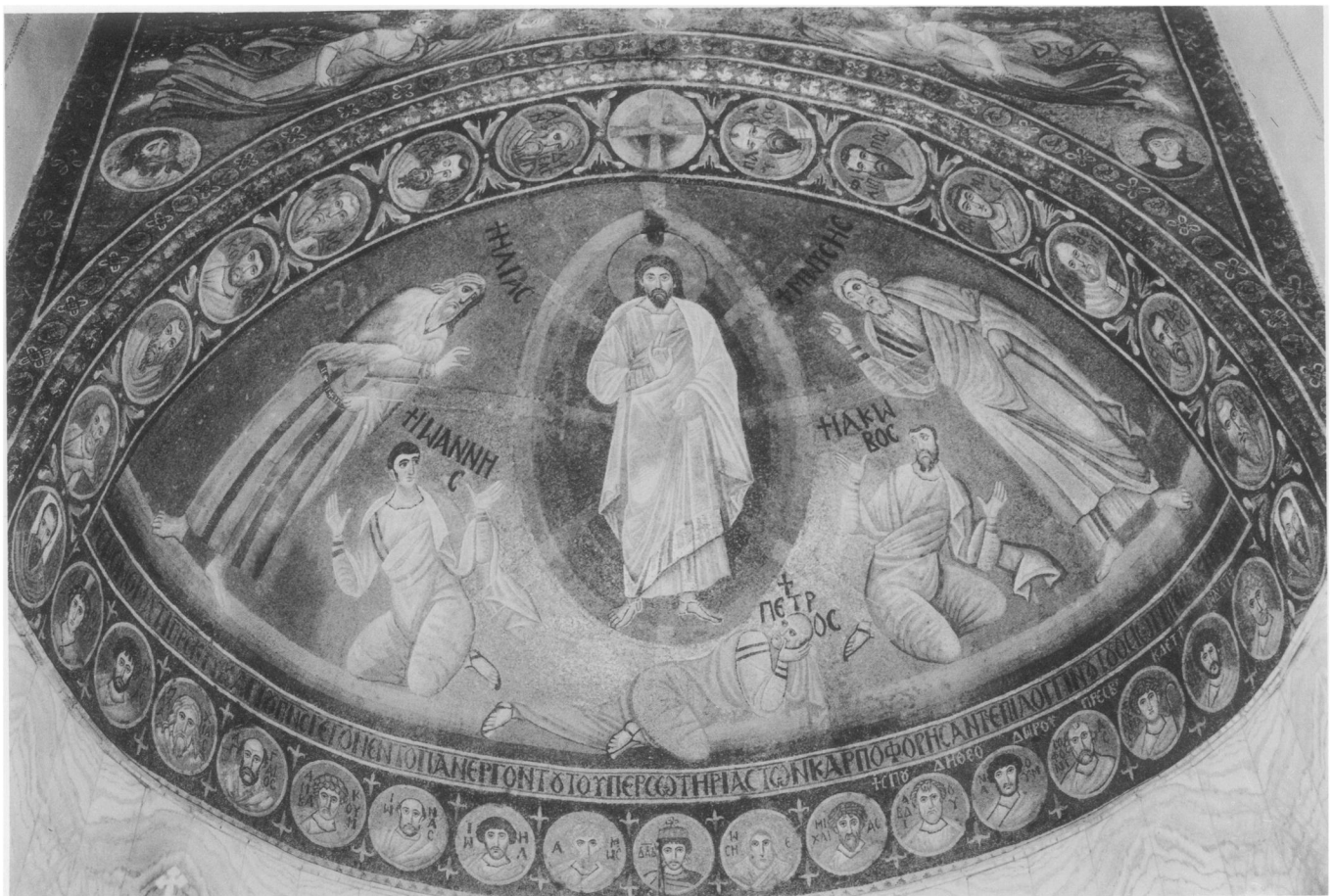
8. Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 510



9. Monreale. Mosaic



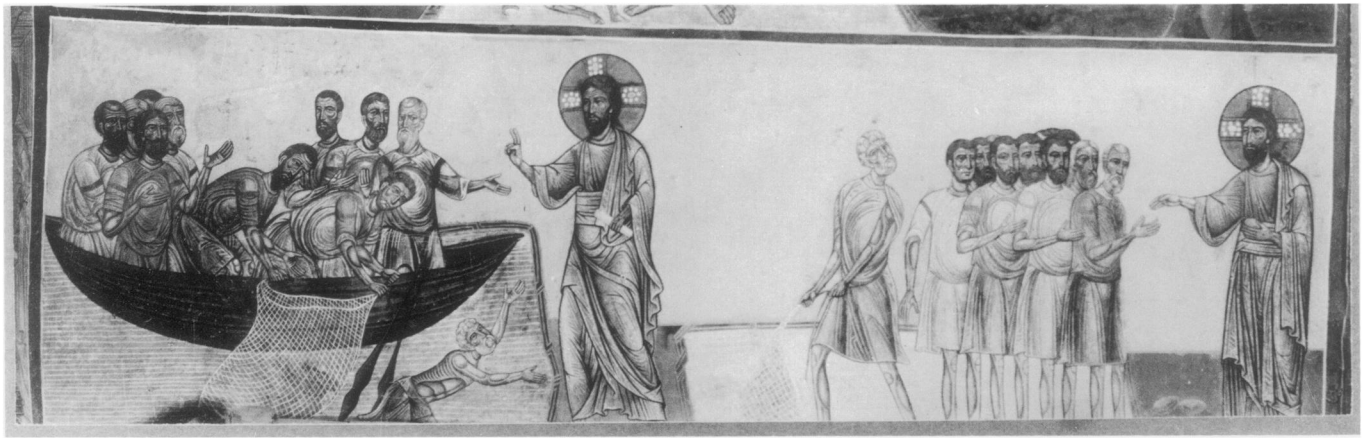
10. Mt. Athos, Iviron, MS 1



11. Mt. Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine. Apse Mosaic

The Transfiguration

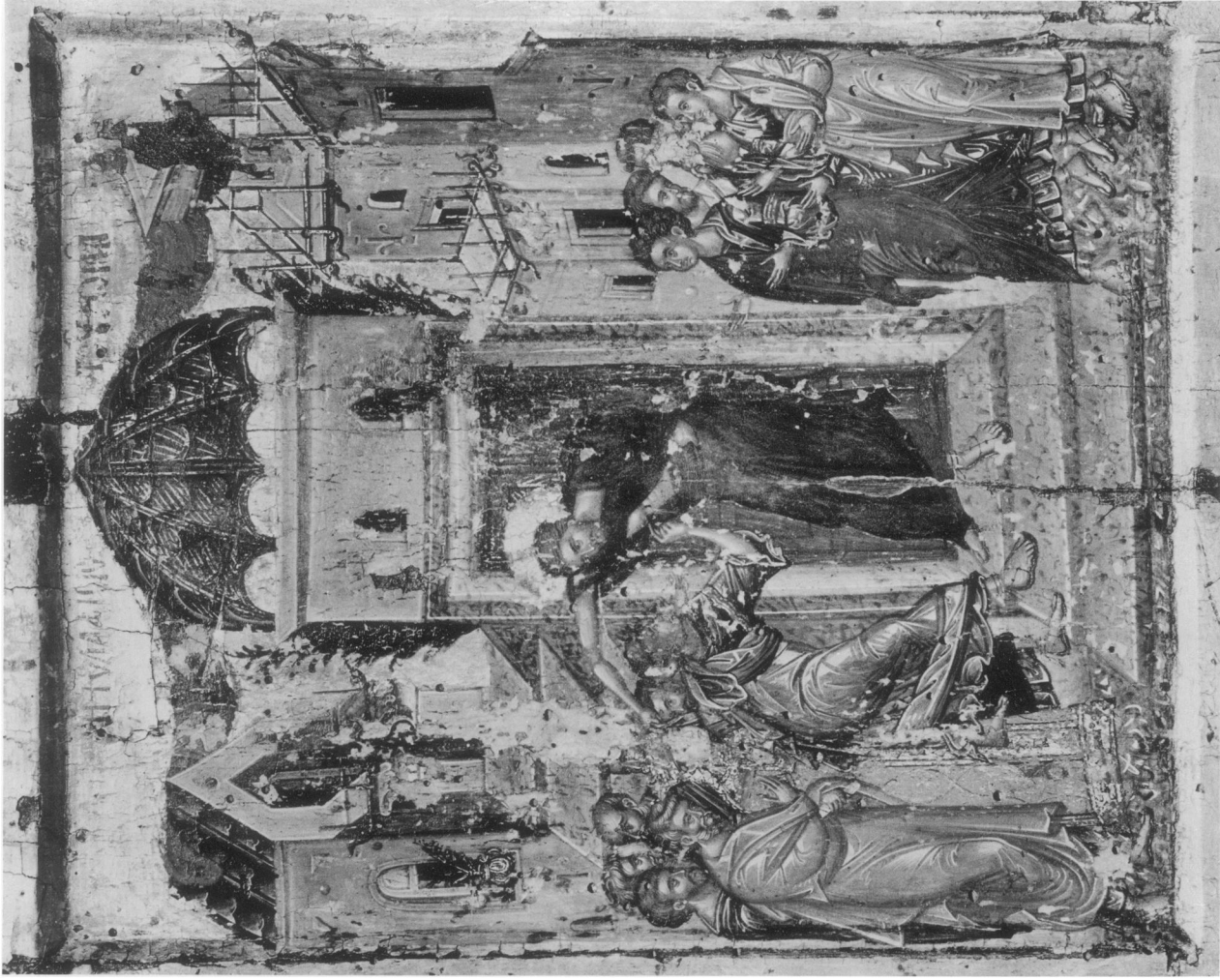




12. Pskov, Mirož Monastery. Fresco, the Miraculous Draught of Fishes



13. Sopoćani. Fresco, the Incredulity of Thomas, Detail

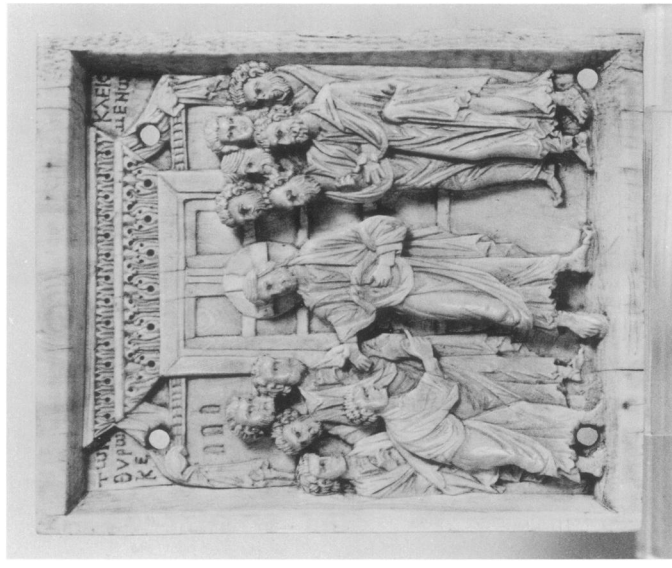


14. Meteora, Monastery of the Transfiguration. Icon

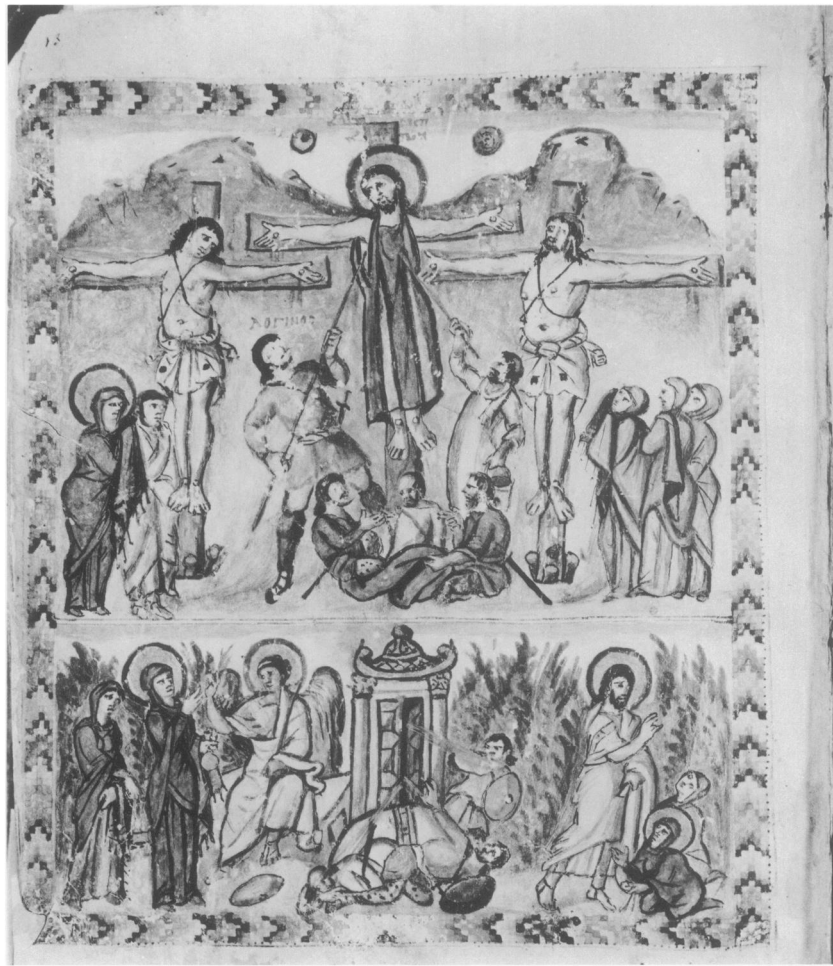
The Incredulity of Thomas



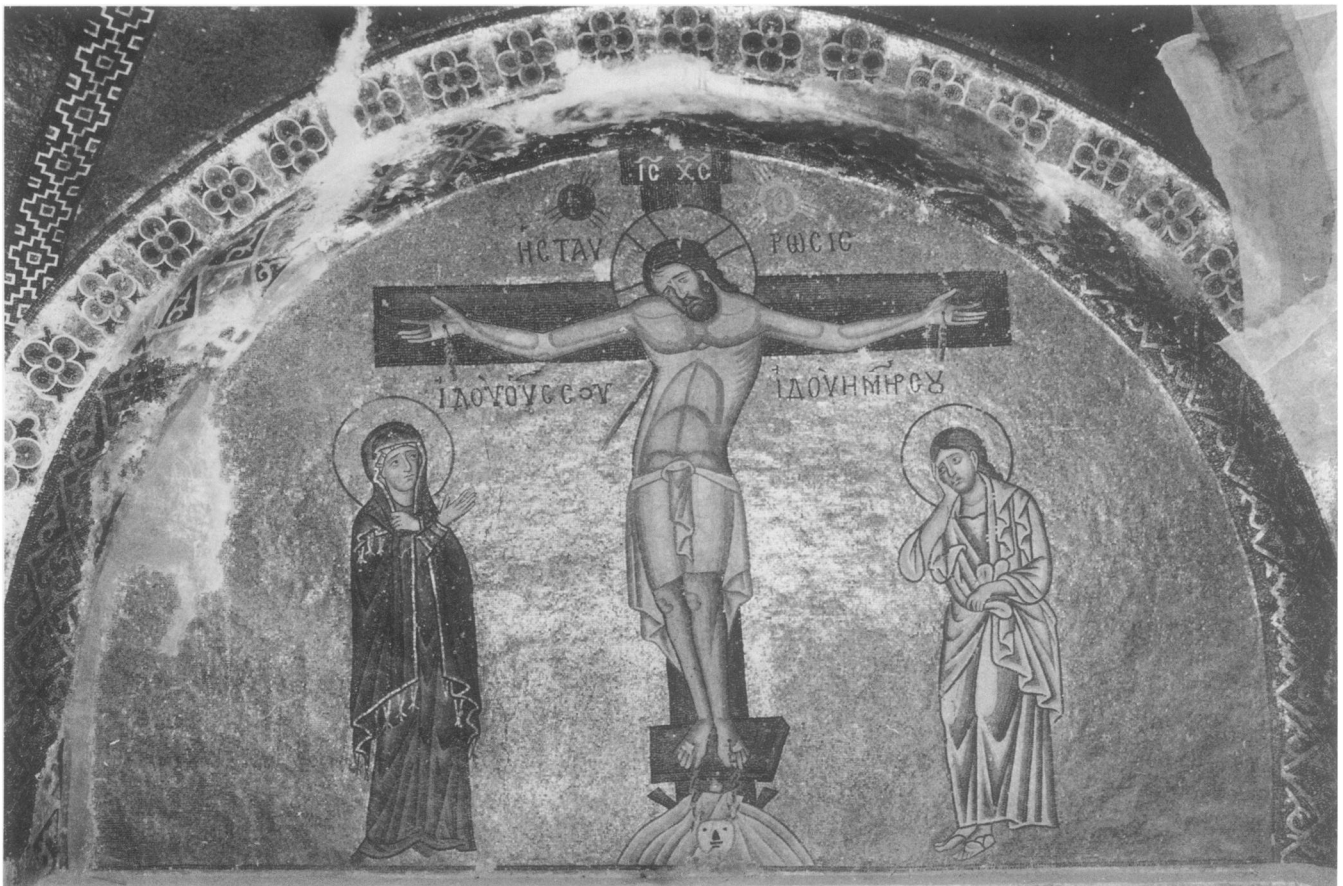
15. Paris, Bibl. Nat., Copte 13



16. Dumbarton Oaks. Ivory



17. Florence, Bibl. Laurenz., Plut. I.56



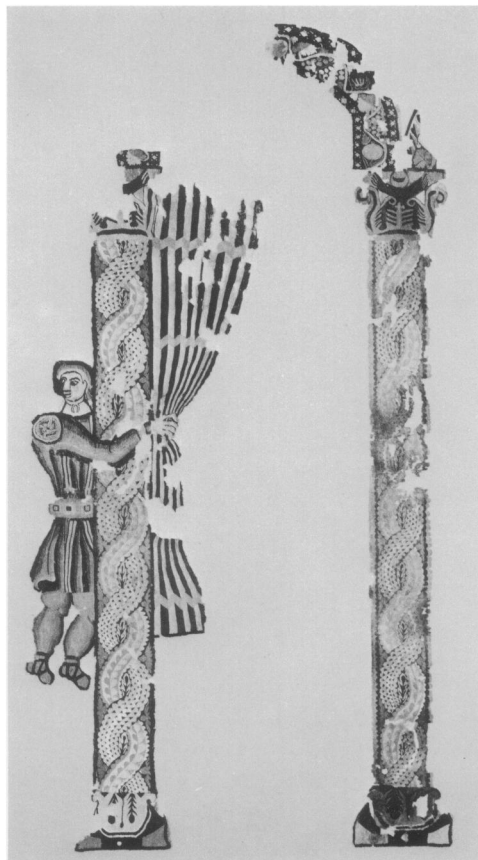
18. Hosios Loukas, Mosaic

The Crucifixion





19. Ravenna, S. Apollinare Nuovo. Mosaic, the Betrayal



20. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Tapestry



21. Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 550, St. Gregory of Nazianzus





22. Daphni. Dome Mosaic, the Pantocrator



23. Istanbul, St. Sophia. Apse Mosaic, the Virgin and Child



24. Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 74, fol. 61v, Detail, the Apostles on the Way to Galilee



25. Asinou. Fresco, the Virgin and Child



26. Monreale. Mosaic, Christ Walking on the Water



27. Chios, Nea Moni. Mosaic, the Anastasis

Homer's description of the shield of Achilles.<sup>85</sup> According to Homer, Hephaestus managed to represent on this shield a prodigious wealth of detail. Homer gives detailed descriptions of scenes of weddings, of a trial, and of war, as well as scenes of ploughing and of harvesting, of vineyards and of pastures. The shield also showed a dance, and depicted the sea and the heavens. In later ekphraseis one often finds, likewise, that the author elaborated on the inventions of the artist. Often he heightened the realism of the drama by providing speech for the mute creations of the sculptor or painter. The tenth-century writer Constantine the Rhodian, for example, concluded his ekphrasis on the mosaics in the church of the Holy Apostles with the lament of the Virgin, delivered at the scene of the Crucifixion.<sup>86</sup> The mother mourns the loss of her only son, and expresses her faith in his triumph. The form of the speech was inspired by the apocryphal Acts of Pilate, in which there is a similar *threnos*.<sup>87</sup>

References to works of art which were so close to nature that they might be capable of speech are very common in the ekphraseis; we find the conceit in a sixth-century description by Choricus of an Annunciation mosaic in the church of St. Sergius at Gaza: "A winged being has just come down, by the painter's art, from heaven, and approaching the Virgin Mother...he greets her with the good news.... He is posed as if he were talking to her, but even if the painter had given him a voice, it would not be easy to hear what was said, for the intervening distance is large."<sup>88</sup> The Byzantine Emperor Leo VI, in a sermon on the decoration of a church founded at the end of the ninth century by the official Stylianus, gives a description of an Annunciation mosaic which echoes that of Choricus: "Here is a winged being just descended from heaven, who converses with a young Virgin. You would say that the representations are not deprived of rational discourse. The artist has diffused so natural a color and character on the faces of the actors that he gives the spectator a sensation similar to that produced by the sound of voice."<sup>89</sup> A similar statement is found in a Greek ekphrasis in a homily by the twelfth-century South Italian preacher Philagathus. Here the subjects of the description are the bereaved mothers in a painting of the Massacre of the Innocents:

<sup>85</sup> *Iliad*, XVIII, v. 475 ff.

<sup>86</sup> Ed. Legrand, "Description," v. 946 ff., p. 64 f.

<sup>87</sup> *Acta Pilati*, part I, B, chap. X.4, in C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia apocrypha* (Leipzig, 1853). There was a tradition of such funerary laments in Byzantine homiletic literature: Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, PG, 44, col. 217D (lament of the the Widow of Nain); Simeon Metaphrastes, *S. Mariae plancus*, PG, 114, col. 212; "Theophanes Cerameus," *De filio viduae*, PG, 132, col. 224Df. (= *Hom. VI*, 8-12, ed. Rossi Taibbi [*supra*, note 15], 40-42). For the lament as a rhetorical form, consult Méridier, *L'influence de la seconde sophistique*, 226 ff., 270 ff.

<sup>88</sup> "Ἄρτι γάρ τις ὑπόπτερος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καταβὰς τῷ ζωγράφῳ καὶ φοιτήσας παρὰ τὴν ἀνευ συνοίκου μητέρα... τοῖς εὐαγγελίοις ἀσπάζεται... Καὶ σχηματίζεται μὲν οἷα τις πρὸς ταύτην διαλεγόμενος, ἀλλὰ γὰρ εἰ καὶ φωνὴν ἐνέθηκεν ὁ ζωγράφος αὐτῷ, οὐ βῆδιον τὰ λεγόμενα - πολὺ γὰρ τὸ μέσον - ἀκούειν. *Laudatio Marc.* (*supra*, note 18), I.48.

<sup>89</sup> "Ἄρτι μὲν γὰρ κόρη παρθένα ὑπόπτερός τις ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ κατιὼν διαλέγεται· εἰποῖς ἂν καὶ λογικῆς μὴ ἀμοιρεῖν τὰ εἰκονίσματα διαλέξεως· οὕτως ἐπὶ τῶν προσώπων φυσικὸν αὐτοῖς ὁ τεχνίτης χρῶμα καὶ ἦθος ἀνέθηκεν, ὃ πείθει τὸν θεατὴν ὑπολαμβάνειν ὡς ἄρα τις συναισθησις λόγου οὕτως αὐτὰ χρωματίζει. *Logos* 34, Λέοντος τοῦ Σοφοῦ πανυγηρικοὶ [sic] λόγοι, ed. Akakios (Athens, 1868), 277; trans. A. Frolov, "Deux églises byzantines," *EtByz*, 3 (1945), 43 f. Four poems ascribed to the twelfth-century poet Theodorus Prodromus which describe another speaking image of the Annunciation are quoted by Bees, "Kunstgeschichtliche Untersuchungen über die Eulaliosfrage" (*supra*, note 62), 103 f.



"Although the artist was not able to imbue his colors with a voice, he signified the laments in his drawing."<sup>90</sup>

There were many other *topoi* concerned with realism. The persons or animals depicted in works of art were often said to be breathing, or to be about to move. There is an epigram, for example, in the Greek Anthology which instructs strangers not to touch a stone statue of Ariadne sleeping, lest she wake and spring up.<sup>91</sup> Another epigram, by the eleventh-century poet Christopher of Mytilene, warns the spectator not to approach a certain bronze horse in the Hippodrome, lest he be trampled under the animal's upraised hoof.<sup>92</sup>

Some images were reputed to be so realistic in their beauty that they inspired love in the beholder. Both Christodorus of Thebes, writing before the destruction of the Zeuxippus Gymnasium in 532, and Nicetas Choniates, writing after the sack of Constantinople in 1204, make this claim for statues of Helen.<sup>93</sup> A pair of Hellenistic epigrams in the Greek Anthology record that the bronze heifer made by Myron attracted the attention of a bull.<sup>94</sup> As we have seen, this information was repeated in the mid-twelfth century by the Byzantine ecclesiastic Constantine Manasses.<sup>95</sup>

If the image depicted a divinity, the writer might declare that the artist himself must have seen the god in order to produce so faithful a likeness. This sentiment was applied both in the pagan and in the Christian context.<sup>96</sup>

This survey has shown that references to realism abound no less in descriptions of Byzantine art than in those of classical art. Yet, as I have noted in the introduction, modern admirers of Byzantine art are keenly aware of the strong element of abstraction which separates Byzantine works from the masterpieces of Hellenistic and Roman art.<sup>97</sup> It is no wonder that it has been asked whether the ekphraseis are truly relevant to an understanding of Byzantine art, or whether they are entirely the products of a dead literary tradition, out of contact with the innovations made by artists. One answer to this question is to suppose that Byzantine writers really did consider contemporary works to be "realistic," because their expectations in this respect were lower than ours are today. The modern critic can compare Byzantine painting with the greater illusionism of Hellenistic and of Renaissance art. But the range of reference of the Byzantine viewer was more limited.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Καὶ ἐπειδὴ μὴ εἶχεν ὁ τεχνίτης φωνὴν ἐνθεῖναι τοῖς χρώμασιν, ἐσήμανε τοὺς θρήνους τοῖς γράμμασιν. "Theophanes Cerameus" (cf. note 14a *supra*), *Homilia* LII, *In sanctos Innocentes*, PG, 132, cols. 924B-C (= *Homilia* XXIV.10, ed. Rossi Taibbi [*supra*, note 15], 159).

<sup>91</sup> *Anthologia Palatina*, XVI, no. 146.

<sup>92</sup> Ed. Kurtz (*supra*, note 49), 30, no. 50.

<sup>93</sup> Christodorus of Thebes, *Anth. Pal.*, II, v. 168f.; Nicetas Choniates, *Narratio de statuis*, PG, 139, col. 1052D.

<sup>94</sup> *Anth. Pal.*, IX, nos. 730, 734.

<sup>95</sup> Ed. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte," col. 75, line 24. The source of this *topos* is presumably the legend of the cow made for Pasiphae as a lure for the bull of Minos.

<sup>96</sup> Mango, "Antique Statuary," 66f.; *Anth. Pal.*, XVI, nos. 81, 162 (statues of Zeus and Aphrodite); A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, Νικηφόρος Κάλλιστος Ξανθόπουλος (*supra*, note 61), no. 14 (mosaic of Christ).

<sup>97</sup> See notes 2-5 *supra*.

<sup>98</sup> A discussion of the "horizon of expectation" in art is found in E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London, 1968), 53.

It should also be remembered that many of the illusionistic devices invented in antiquity survived in Byzantine painting, even if they were used less consistently. An example is the trick of showing one form overlapping another, so that there appears to be a recession in space. This arrangement is commended in the third-century ekphrasis of Philostratus the Elder. In describing a painting which shows a siege of Thebes and an army surrounding the walls he says that the artist represents "... some men complete, some with the legs obscured, some half hidden, and just the busts of some, and heads only, and helmets only, finally just the spear points."<sup>99</sup> By this means, says Philostratus, the painter obtains an effect of recession. This description recalls the depictions of armies on Roman triumphal monuments, in which the background figures are indicated by glimpses of shoulders, heads, and spears which appear over the tops of the soldiers in the foreground.<sup>100</sup> The technique of overlap survived in Early Christian and Byzantine art. In the sixth century Choricus comments upon it in his ekphrasis on the mosaics of St. Sergius. He tells us that in the scene of the Raising of the Widow's Son the mourning women, "being grouped together, block each other partially from view. But you might suppose that if you set them apart from each other, each one had been painted completely..."<sup>101</sup> Again, we can find parallels for this description in contemporary works of art. In the sixth-century mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and of San Vitale in Ravenna, for example, groups of figures which overlap each other are frequently represented (see fig. 19). The device was also described by another orator of Gaza, Choricus' instructor Procopius. He is talking of an attendant in a painting of the palace of Theseus: "Screening himself behind one of the columns he divides himself, hiding the lower part of his body, so that he is only half visible. And winning an easy flight from his master's attention, he thrusts out his head as he looks out, and his hand as he moves."<sup>102</sup> A late antique textile from Egypt in the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston shows a man drawing back a curtain which hangs between two columns, so that, like the palace attendant described by Procopius, he is partially screened from view (fig. 20).<sup>103</sup>

These correspondences between descriptions and works of art demonstrate that passages in the ekphraseis which had literary antecedents may still have been relevant to contemporary art. A *topos* was not necessarily untrue.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>99</sup> ... τοὺς μὲν ἀρτίους παρέχει ὁρᾶν, τοὺς δὲ ἀσαφεῖς τὰ σκέλη, τοὺς δὲ ἡμίσεας καὶ στέρνα ἐνίων καὶ κεφαλὰς μόνας καὶ κόρυθας μόνας, εἶτα αἰχμάς. *Imagines*, I.4.2.

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, a battle relief from the "Great Trajanic Frieze" on the Arch of Constantine; D. E. Strong, *Roman Imperial Sculpture* (London, 1961), pl. 75.

<sup>101</sup> Καὶ συνημμένοι μὲν ἐξ ταῦτὸν ἀλλήλαις γίνονται κώλυμα τοῦ μὴ τελέως ὀφθῆναι· ὑπολάβοις δ' ἂν αὐτάς, εἰ διασπῆσαις ἀλλήλων, ὅλην ἐκάστην γεγράφθαι ... *Laudatio Marc.*, I.63.

<sup>102</sup> Προκάλυμμα δὲ τινα τῶν κίωνων ποιῶν καὶ πρὸς ἑκάτερα μερίσας αὐτόν, τὰ κάτω μὲν ἀποκρύπτει τοῦ σώματος, ἡμιτελὴς δὲ τις φαινόμενος καὶ βαδίαν ἑαυτῷ τὴν φυγὴν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ δεσπότητος προσλαγχάνων αἰσθήσεως, προβάλλει τὴν μὲν κεφαλὴν πρὸς θέαν, τὴν δὲ χεῖρα πρὸς κίνησιν. *Descriptio imaginis*, 14, line 131 ff., ed. Friedländer.

<sup>103</sup> L. Salmon, "An Eastern Mediterranean Puzzle," *Boston Museum Bulletin*, 67, no. 350 (1969), 136 ff., figs. 1, 11.

<sup>104</sup> The same point has been made with regard to conventions of rhetoric by I. Ševčenko, *Études sur la polémique entre Théodore Métochite et Nicéphore Choumnos* (Brussels, 1962), 171 note 2.

If the ekphraseis were strongly bound by tradition, Byzantine art was no less so, and many of the illusionistic practices of antiquity survived into the Middle Ages.

The same point can be demonstrated in the case of another well-known *topos*, the statement that the artist has managed to combine two or more contradictory emotions in one figure. This *topos* has had a long history, from antiquity to the present day.<sup>105</sup> According to Pliny, the standard of accomplishment which later artists had to emulate was set in the fourth century B.C. by the painter Parrhasius. Pliny, writing in the first century A.D., tells us that this artist painted a personification of the Athenian *Demos*, showing it simultaneously as "... variable, irascible, unjust, inconstant, but also placable, clement, and merciful; it was boastful, ... lofty and humble, fierce and timid, and everything at the same time."<sup>106</sup> It was more usual, however, for writers to consider the conveyance of only two conflicting emotions in the same character a triumph of realism. Thus Philostratus the Elder praises a painter for showing Apollo's anger at the thefts of the infant Hermes giving way to amusement.<sup>107</sup> The second-century novelist Achilles Tatius wrote an ekphrasis on a painting of the rape of Europa, in which the aspect of Europa's companions was said to be made up of both joy and fear.<sup>108</sup> There are also many epigrams in the Greek Anthology which speak of images showing opposite emotions. Damocharis says that a painting of Sappho was both gay and intellectual in its facial expression.<sup>109</sup> There is a sequence of poems, by different authors, which describe images of Medea on the point of slaying her children. Several say that her expression combines the jealousy and rage she harbors on account of her husband with the tenderness she feels for her children.<sup>110</sup> This stereotyped description of Medea was borrowed by a Christian bishop, Asterius of Amasia, who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, in an ekphrasis devoted to a painting of the martyrdom of St. Euphemia. Asterius says that he had previously admired paintings which portrayed the combined rage and pity of Medea. Now he turns his admiration to the representation of St. Euphemia, in which are combined the modesty and the courage of the virgin martyr.<sup>111</sup>

It is small wonder that this often repeated cliché received the scorn of Sir Joshua Reynolds. He remarks that Pliny "... observes that in a statue of Paris, by Euphranor, you might discover at the same time three different characters; the dignity of a judge of the goddesses, the lover of Helen, and the conqueror of Achilles. A statue in which you endeavour to unite stately dignity,

<sup>105</sup> Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 293, gives a recent example.

<sup>106</sup> "... varium iracundum iniustum inconstantem, eundem exorabilem clementem misericordem; gloriosum ..., excelsum humilem, ferocem fugacemque et omnia pariter. *Naturalis historia*, XXXV.69.

<sup>107</sup> *Imagines*, I.26.5.

<sup>108</sup> *Leucippe and Clitophon*, I.1, 6ff. See also the account by Callistratus of a statue of Memnon which expressed both grief and joy: *Descriptions*, 9.

<sup>109</sup> *Anth. Pal.*, XVI, no. 310.

<sup>110</sup> *Anth. Pal.*, XVI, nos. 135, 136, 138, 139, 140, 143. See also Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 13.2.

<sup>111</sup> *In Laudem S. Euphemiae*, PG, 40, col. 337A; Mango, "Antique Statuary," 65.

youthful elegance, and stern valour, must surely possess none of these to any eminent degree."<sup>112</sup>

But in spite of the strictures of Reynolds, there are, in fact, certain commonly employed artistic devices which correspond to this *topos*. One is the practice of giving a different shape to the features of each side of the face, particularly to the eyes, even when the pose is frontal. In a few instances the descriptions in the ekphraseis appear to refer directly to this device, although it is obviously not a convincing basis for the more elaborate passages on mixed passions. Manolis Chatzidakis has drawn attention to a word portrait of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, written by Elpios in the ninth or the tenth century, which describes the look of the Saint as gentle and kindly, but of his right eye as sullen, as it was contracted by a scar.<sup>113</sup> In a portrait of the Saint which adorns a twelfth-century manuscript of his Sermons, the disparity in the sizes of the eyes is very striking, the right one being the smaller (fig. 21).<sup>114</sup> Here, there does appear to be a close correspondence between a literary *topos* and artistic practice.

The ultimate literary source of the description of St. Gregory of Nazianzus by Elpios is probably the account written by Chrysippus in the third century B.C. of the figure of Justice, as she was usually depicted by painters and orators. She was said to inspire fear in the unjust and courage in the just; to the latter her face was friendly, to the former it was hostile.<sup>115</sup> This characterization was applied by Byzantine historians and eulogists to imperial persons.<sup>116</sup> It was also used by Mesarites, around the year 1200, to describe the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in the Holy Apostles. We are told that "His eyes, to those who have achieved a clean understanding, are gentle and friendly and instil the joy of contrition in the souls of the pure in heart . . . . To those, however, who are condemned by their own judgment they are scornful and hostile and boding of ill. . . ." <sup>117</sup> In both the pre-iconoclastic and in the post-iconoclastic period we can find parallels in works of art which seem to justify the use of this *topos* by Mesarites. In the original late eleventh-century mosaic of Christ Pantocrator at Daphni there was a striking asymmetry in the treatment of the eyes and cheeks, and it was partly from this asymmetry that the image derived its power (fig. 22).<sup>118</sup> A pronounced disparity between the eyes can also be found in certain pre-iconoclastic bust portraits of Christ, such as an encaustic icon at Mount Sinai, perhaps of the sixth century, and

<sup>112</sup> *Discourse V* (London, 1772).

<sup>113</sup> ἡμερον βλέπων καὶ προσήνēs, θάτερον τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν, ὅς ἦν δεξιός, στυγνότερος, ὃν καὶ οὐλὴ κατὰ τὸν κανθὸν συνῆγε. M. Chatzidakis, "An Encaustic Icon of Christ at Sinai," *ArtB*, 49 (1967), 200 note 11.

<sup>114</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 550, fol. 4.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted by Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, XIV.4.1f.

<sup>116</sup> For example, by Anna Comnena in descriptions of Alexis (*Alexiad*, III.3.2), and of Anna Dalassena (*ibid.*, 8.3); so also "Theophanes Cerameus" (Philagathus) in an address to the King of Sicily, *Homilia* LV, PG, 132, col. 952B (= *Homilia* XXVII.1, ed. Rossi Taibbi, 174).

<sup>117</sup> οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τοῖς ἀκατάγνωστον κεκτημένοις τὸ συνειδὸς ἱλαροὶ καὶ εὐπρόσιτοι καὶ γλυκασμὸν καταλύξως ἐνσταλάττοντες ταῖς ψυχαῖς τῶν καθαρῶν τῇ καρδίᾳ . . . οἷς δ' αὐτοκατάκριτον τὸ οἰκτεῖον κριτήριον, ὀργίλοι δυσπρόσιτοί τινες καὶ δυσάντητοι . . . XIV.3ff., ed. Downey.

<sup>118</sup> The asymmetry is less evident in the restoration, which, fortunately, took place after the mosaic had been photographed. G. Millet, *Le monastère de Daphni* (Paris, 1899), 105, fig. 48.



the images on a group of solidi of Justinian II (type A) which date between 692 and 695.<sup>119</sup> In this case, also, artistic and literary tradition appear to have run a parallel course.

On some occasions, however, the conventional *topos* of the combination of contrary emotions could lead a writer into a false or inaccurate description of a work of art. A case in point is a homily delivered in 867 by the Patriarch Photius, in the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople, which vividly describes a portrayal of Mary carrying her Child: "A virgin mother, with a virgin's and a mother's gaze, dividing in indivisible form her temperament between both capacities, yet belittling neither by its incompleteness. With such exactitude has the art of painting, which is a reflection of inspiration from above, set up a lifelike imitation. For, as it were, she fondly turns her eyes on her begotten Child in the affection of her heart, yet assumes the expression of a detached and imperturbable mood at the passionless and wondrous nature of her offspring, and composes her gaze accordingly."<sup>120</sup> It is almost certain that the homily of Photius refers to the mosaic now to be seen in the apse of St. Sophia (fig. 23).<sup>121</sup> This gives the ekphrasis a particular importance, as it is one of the few which can still be checked against their subjects. In the mosaic the Virgin appears frontally, holding the Christ Child on her lap. She stares out into space, an attitude which would correspond with the expression of detachment described by Photius. But there is no indication in the mosaic that the Virgin is looking down toward her offspring, as the words of Photius also suggest. It appears that Photius exaggerated the element of maternal affection in the image, according to literary convention. For other Byzantine writers as well speak of Mary combining the expression of a virgin and of a mother. The description was applied by Leo VI, also in the ninth century, to a mosaic in the Kauleas monastery.<sup>122</sup> It appears, too, in a poem on a painting of the Virgin which was written by Manuel Philes in the Palaeologan period.<sup>123</sup>

The commonplace that two or more emotions could be represented in one figure has had a long history, and the *topos* has taken many forms. It was used by the writers of the ekphraseis both aptly and inaptly. But in itself it does not constitute a falsehood.

In addition to repeating *topoi* concerned with realism, Byzantine writers inserted into their descriptions tags quoted verbatim from well-known classical

<sup>119</sup> Chatzidakis, *op. cit.*, 200, figs. 3 and 10.

<sup>120</sup> Παρθένος μήτηρ, παρθένον ἄμα καὶ μητρικὸν ὁρῶσα, καὶ πρὸς ἄμφω τὰς σχέσεις ἐν ἀμερίστῳ σχήματι μεριζομένη τὸ βούλημα, καὶ μηδέτερον μέρος τῷ ἀτελεῖ ἐξυβρίζουσα. Ὑπόκρισις ἄρα τῆς ἀνωθεν ἐπιπνοίας ἡ ζωγράφος τέχνη, οὕτως ἀκριβῶς εἰς φύσιν τὴν μίμησιν ἔστησεν. Καὶ γὰρ οἴονεϊ τῇ μὲν στοργῇ τῶν σπλάγχχνων τὴν ὄψιν πρὸς τὸ τεχθὲν συμπαθῶς ἐπιστρέφουσα, οἷα δὲ τῷ ἀπαθεί καὶ ὑπερφυεῖ τοῦ τόκου εἰς ἀσχετον ἄμα καὶ ἀτάραχον ἀρμοζομένη κατάστημα διαθέσεως παραπλησίως φέρεϊ τὸ ὅμμα σχηματιζόμενον. *Homilia* XVII, ed. S. Aristarches (Constantinople, 1900), II, 299; ed. B. Laourdas (Salonica, 1959), 167; C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 290. I am indebted to Professor Mango for permission to quote from his translation.

<sup>121</sup> C. Mango, E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul," *DOP*, 19 (1965), 115 ff., esp. 142 f.

<sup>122</sup> *Logos* 28, ed. Akakios (*supra*, note 89), 246; Frolov, "Deux églises byzantines," 47.

<sup>123</sup> *Manuelis Philae carmina*, ed. Miller, I (Paris, 1855), 317, no. CXXV.

authors. These, too, could be used either to give a misleading or an accurate description of the object. An interesting example of the former is provided by an inscription on a sixth-century floor mosaic in the north wing of the transept of St. Demetrius in Nikopolis. The mosaic has a central field containing trees, flowers, and birds. No other animals are represented, but the inscription below this panel says that it shows the earth with "everything . . . that breathes and creeps." This somewhat inappropriate phrase is a quotation from Homer.<sup>124</sup>

On other occasions, however, Homeric tags were used in contexts where they may well have been relevant. We may take as an example the description by Mesarites of a mosaic in the Holy Apostles in Constantinople which portrayed the Apostles on their way to Galilee, after the discovery of the Resurrection. The writer records that the disciples follow "in a row," and, borrowing from Homer, he compares them to a "linked golden cord."<sup>125</sup> They are led by St. Peter, who is depicted as taking "long strides," another Homeric phrase;<sup>126</sup> some disciples are represented as young and some as old men, but "the youth does not outrun the old man, and the grown man does not spring out before the aged one. . . ."<sup>127</sup> This description perfectly fits the illustration of the Apostles going to Galilee which survives in an eleventh-century Gospel book in Paris (fig. 24),<sup>128</sup> probably illuminated in Constantinople. The Apostles are shown in a long file, as they run toward Christ; the elder Apostles, represented with white hair and beards, are toward the head of the procession; St. Peter leads, and the runners are taking long strides. Thus the two quotations, which Mesarites takes from Homer, are seen to be perfectly apt; if the mosaic in the Holy Apostles resembled the miniature in the Paris Gospels, his description was accurate. Of course, since the mosaics of the Holy Apostles are lost, we will never be able to prove conclusively that the use of *topoi* by Mesarites was accurate or inaccurate; we can only point to instances where the evidence of other surviving Byzantine works of art tends to corroborate or contradict what he says.

One of these Homeric quotations was used in a different context, but no less appropriately, by Constantine the Rhodian in his tenth-century poem on the Holy Apostles. In his description of the mosaic of the Betrayal, Constantine records of Judas that ". . . his feet are stretched out in haste, and he takes long strides on his wicked path."<sup>129</sup> The reference to "long strides" is

<sup>124</sup> πάντα . . . ὅσα πνίει τε καὶ ἔρπει. E. Kitzinger, "Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics," *DOP*, 6 (1951), 95ff., esp. 100f., fig. 18.

<sup>125</sup> Χρυσέα σείρά τις ἀλληλένδετος. XXXII.9, ed. Downey; *Iliad*, VIII, v. 19. See also Procopius of Caesarea on the suspension of the dome of St. Sophia in Constantinople by means of a golden cord from heaven; *De aedificiis*, I.1.46. A twelfth-century poet applied the simile of the golden cord to a dynastic portrait of the Emperor Manuel Comnenus, with his father John and his son Alexius; S. Lambros, *Νέος Ἑλλ.*, 8 (1911), 173, no. 318.

<sup>126</sup> μακρὰ βιβῶντα. XXXII.6, ed. Downey; *Iliad*, VII, v. 213, XIII, v. 809 (Ajax); *Odyssey*, IX, v. 450 (the ram of Cyclops), XI, v. 539 (Achilles) (references given by Downey).

<sup>127</sup> ὁ νέος οὐ προτρέχει τοῦ γέροντος, ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῦ παρρηγηκότος οὐ προπηδᾷ . . . XXXII.2, ed. Downey.

<sup>128</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 74, fol. 61v; Omont, *Evangelies*, pl. 56.

<sup>129</sup> πόδες τὲ γὰρ σπεύδουσιν ἐκτεταμένοι, μακρὰ βιβῶντες εἰς ἀτάσθαλον τρίβον, ed. Legrand, "Description," v. 896f.

again apposite. In works of art Judas was often depicted striding toward Christ in order to kiss him. One finds him represented thus, for example, in an early sixth-century mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (fig. 19), as well as in post-iconoclastic works.<sup>130</sup>

A number of the ekphraseis take the form of, or are part of, sermons. It was natural, then, that certain *topoi* characteristic of homiletic literature should be incorporated into the ekphraseis. Again, we find that these *topoi* could give rise both to accurate and to inaccurate descriptions, depending upon their use. A good example of the misuse of such a *topos* is an inscription in the church of Asinou in Cyprus; it is dated 1332–33. The painting to which it refers is placed over the west doorway and shows the Virgin raising her arms in the orant pose; enclosed in a medallion, which is painted over her chest, is a bust of the infant Christ (fig. 25). The inscription around the painting reads: "How is he who holds together all judgments held as a babe in a virgin's arms."<sup>131</sup> Since the fresco does not show the Virgin actually holding Christ, the inscription seems unsuitable. It is, indeed, a repetition of a common literary conceit, which is also to be found, for example, in Mesarites's ekphrasis on the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. In his description of a mosaic showing the Nativity, Mesarites writes:<sup>132</sup> "... He who holds together all things in his omnipotent hand is carried by a hand without strength. ..." The same sentiment was expressed in the ninth century by the Patriarch Photius, in the sermon devoted to the mosaic of the Virgin and Child in St. Sophia.<sup>133</sup> Here we can see that Mary was actually shown carrying her Child (fig. 23). This *topos*, with its play upon the paradoxes of the Nativity, also appeared in sermons which were not concerned with works of art.<sup>134</sup>

Sometimes the conventions of the sermons and biblical commentaries were rendered pictorially in works of art. When this occurred, the writers of the descriptions were justified in quoting from homilies. For example, Mesarites, in his description of the mosaic of the Walking on the Water, gives an interesting description of Christ rescuing Peter from the waves: "... Peter's right hand is seized by both hands of the Pantocrator which draw him up completely like another Adam out of the depth of Hades. ..." <sup>135</sup> The link between the saving of Peter from the water and the redemption of man was also made in the eleventh century by Theophylactus, in a commentary on St. Matthew's gospel: "The ship is the earth, the waves are life troubled by bad spirits, and the night is ignorance. In the fourth watch, at the end, that is, of the ages,

<sup>130</sup> E.g., Diez and Demus, *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece*, fig. 98 (Daphni); O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1949), fig. 70 (Monreale).

<sup>131</sup> ὡς πῶς ὁ πάντων συνεχῆς τῶν κριμάτων βρεφοκρατεῖται παρθενικαῖς ὠλέναις. W. H. Buckler, "The Church of Asinou, Cyprus, and its Frescoes," *Archaeologia*, 83 (1933), 336.

<sup>132</sup> ὁ συνεχῶν τὰ πάντα παντοδυνάμω δρακί ὑπὸ χειρὸς ἀνάγκιδος βασταζόμενος .... XXIII.2, ed. Downey.

<sup>133</sup> *Homilia* XVII, ed. Aristarches, 299; ed. Laourdas, 167.

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, a sermon ascribed by its title to St. Athanasius, but not written before the fifth century, in PG, 28, col. 961A. Compare PG, 46, col. 1142D ("St. Gregory of Nyssa").

<sup>135</sup> ... ὡς τῆς δεξιᾶς ὑπ' ἀμφοτέρων τῶν παντοκρατορικῶν ἐπειλημμένης χειρῶν καὶ ὄλον τὸν Πέτρον ὡς ἄλλον Ἀδὰμ ὡς ἐξ ἄδου ἀναγουσῶν τοῦ βυθοῦ .... XXV.18, ed. Downey.

Christ appears. For the first watch is the covenant with Abraham, the second the law of Moses, the third the prophets, and the fourth the advent of the Lord. For he himself saved those who were buffeted in the waves. . . ."<sup>136</sup> Thus Mesarites's comparison of Adam and Peter had literary precedents, at least with respect to the theme of redemption. But it also had a very specific reference to works of art. Among the late twelfth-century mosaics of Monreale, which were executed by Byzantine artists, there is a scene of Christ walking on the waves (fig. 26). The Lord is shown stepping toward St. Peter, and raising him by the right hand. Through the waves St. Peter's right leg is seen bent beneath him, as if he were trying to rise to his feet; his left leg is stretched out straight behind him. At Monreale, in the mosaic of the Walking on the Water, the attitudes of Christ and St. Peter seem to have been similar to those of Christ and Adam in the mosaic of the Anastasis. Unfortunately, the Anastasis mosaic at Monreale has been badly restored, and we only know its original form through an eighteenth-century engraving.<sup>137</sup> The surviving eleventh-century mosaic of this scene at the Nea Moni on Chios (fig. 27), however, mirrors the composition of the principal figures in the Walking on the Water at Monreale.

Frequently, Byzantine authors incorporated into their *ekphraseis topoi* which were not merely short phrases or single conceits, but relatively long passages of description. But even these extensive descriptions could be accurate, in part if not in their entirety. There was a venerable tradition, for example, of accounts of storms at sea. In describing the mosaic of Christ Walking on the Water, Mesarites gives a vivid representation of the angry sea. First, he expresses wonder that there can be waters depicted high up on the wall of the church, as it were in the air. Then, he proceeds: "Gaze on this howling sea; see the waves, how some are piled up high as mountains, as they roll in the open sea, while others lie quiet, as they are drawn to shore on the coast, as if, from reverence for the Lord who stands there, they gathered themselves together and broke themselves off. Observe how the atmosphere about it is dark, how it is misty, so to speak, and smoky; how the clouds are gathered, how violently the air bears along the ship on the clashing of the waves, as some northeast or arctic Boreal wind blows stormily."<sup>138</sup> This passage follows a standard pattern for descriptions of storms at sea in late classical and Byzantine writers. A similar passage occurs in the eleventh-century *Chronographia* of Michael Psellus. Although many words are the same, the context is com-

<sup>136</sup> σκάφος, ἡ γῆ· κύματα, ὁ βίος ὑπὸ τῶν πονηρῶν πνευμάτων ταραττόμενος, νύξ, ἡ ἀγνωσία. Ἐν τῇ τετάρτῃ δὲ φυλακῇ, πρὸς τῷ τέλει δηλονότι τῶν αἰώνων, ἐπέστη ὁ Χριστός. Πρώτῃ μὲν γὰρ φυλακῇ, ἡ πρὸς Ἀβραάμ διαθήκη· δευτέρῃ, ὁ Μωσέως νόμος· τρίτῃ, οἱ προφῆται· τετάρτῃ, ἡ τοῦ Κυρίου παρουσία· αὐτὸς γὰρ ἔσωσε τοὺς κλυδωνιζομένους, εἰσελθὼν καὶ γενόμενος μεθ' ἡμῶν . . . . *Enarratio in Evangelium Matthiae*, XIV.31–33; PG, 123, col. 304A.

<sup>137</sup> M. del Giudice, *Descrizione del real tempio e monasterio di Santa Maria Nuova, di Monreale* (Palermo, 1702), pl. 22, 7.

<sup>138</sup> Ὅρα τὴν ὠρυωμένην ταύτην θάλατταν, ὅρα τὰ κύματα, πῶς τὰ μὲν κορυφοῦνται ἴσα καὶ ὄρεσιν, ὅσα δὲ περὶ τὸ πέλαγος κυματίζουσι, τὰ δὲ γαληνιῶσιν, ὅσα δὲ κατάγονται περὶ τὴν ἀκτὴν, τὸν ἐπ' αὐτῆς ἐστῶτα δεσπότην οἶον αἰδούμενα καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὰ συστελλόμενα τε καὶ ἀνακλῶμενα, πῶς κατάσκοτος ὁ περὶ ταύτην ἀήρ, πῶς ὀμιχλώδης οἶον καὶ καπνηρός, πῶς συννεφής, πῶς περισκελές τὸ πλοῖον τῇ τῶν κυμάτων ἀλλεπαλλήλῳ φορᾷ, εὐρυκλύδωνός τινος ἢ καὶ ἀπαρκτίου βορέου πνέοντος δυσσαές. XXV.6, ed. Downey.

pletely different, for here Psellus is describing the storms which beset the life of a Byzantine emperor. The emperor's existence, he says, is like "a sea which for a short while is smooth and quiet, but at other times the waves flow and shake, as now the Boreal wind disturbs it, now the arctic wind, and now some other of the winds which stir up the waves, as I myself have seen on many an occasion."<sup>139</sup> Similar accounts of storms at sea can be found in the works of the fourth-century Cappadocian Church Fathers St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>140</sup> And we can go back further, to a description of a storm in one of the *Fishermen's Letters* by the sophist Alciphron which reads: "The sea, as you see, shudders, a mist has spread under the sky, everything everywhere is clouded over, and the winds, dashing against each other, proclaim that they will immediately stir up the sea."<sup>141</sup> Since the description of the sea in Mesarites owes so much to literary convention, one would not expect that he has here given us a very accurate account of the mosaic of Christ Walking on the Water. But his description, conventional though it is, may still contain elements of truth, particularly in the opening sentence describing the waves. The sentence clearly is a *topos*, for Psellus also opened his description by contrasting a calm with a stormy sea. But if we look at the mosaic at Monreale, we find that here too the sea behind Christ is calm, while in front of him it forms high waves (fig. 26). This is, in fact, an illustration of Matthew 14:32, which relates that when Christ and Peter boarded the ship, the wind ceased. Here again, therefore, a literary convention may have conveyed a truth, if the mosaic in the Holy Apostles resembled that at Monreale.

In these pages I have reviewed many of the *topoi* which occurred in the Byzantine literature on art and have found some in the introductions to the ekphraseis, others scattered through the descriptions in the form of tags quoted from classical authors. A majority took the form of stereotyped allusions to realism, often referring to the depiction of emotion. There were also long ready-made descriptions.

For the sake of brevity, I have omitted several varieties of *topos*, such as conventional allusions to famous artists of antiquity,<sup>142</sup> ways of describing color, and references to precious materials, particularly gold. But sufficient examples have been discussed to show that the conventions of the ekphraseis

<sup>139</sup> ἄλλ' ὥσπερ θάλασσα βραχὺ μὲν κατεσφόρεσται καὶ γαληνῇ, τὰ δ' ἄλλα τοῦτο μὲν πλημμυρεῖ, τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τινάσσεται κύμασι, νῦν μὲν βορέου διαταράττοντος, νῦν δ' ἀπαρκτίου, νῦν δ' ἄλλου τινὸς τῶν ἐγειρόντων κλυδώνιον, ὅπερ αὐτὸς ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ἐωράκειν. *Chronographia*, VI.27.

<sup>140</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmen de vita sua*, PG, 37, col. 1038; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica Cantecorum*, PG, 44, col. 869B.

<sup>141</sup> Τὴν μὲν θάλατταν, ὡς ὄρῃς, φρίκη κατέχει καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν ὑποβέβηκεν ἀχλὺς καὶ πάντα πανταχόθεν συννέφηλα, καὶ οἱ ἀνεμοὶ δὲ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀρασσόμενοι ὅσον οὐπὼ κυκῆσειν τὸ πέλαγος ἐπαγγέλλονται. Alciphron, *Epistulae*, I.10.1ff. Another storm ekphrasis appears in Apollonius of Tyre, *Historia*, 11, ed. A. Riese, Teubner (1871).

<sup>142</sup> Some examples have been given by Mango, "Antique Statuary," 65f. See also *Anth. Pal.*, IX, no. 776 (Zeuxis), and XVI, no. 344 (Lysippus); Philostratus, *Apollonii vita*, II.20 (Zeuxis, Polygnotus, Euphranor); Psellus, *Chronographia*, III.14 (Pheidias, Polygnotus, Zeuxis); Prodromus in *Carmina inedita Theodori Prodromi et Stephani Physopalamitae*, ed. C. Welz (Leipzig, 1910), 15 (Apelles, Praxiteles); Constantine Manasses, ed. Sternbach, "Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte," col. 75, lines 21–23 (Pheidias, Praxiteles, Lysippus, Parrhasius).

were in themselves neither true nor false; they could be used to give both accurate and inaccurate descriptions.

It remains to account for the disparities in accuracy between the ekphraseis. One might perhaps expect that, as Byzantine art became further removed in time and overall character from its late antique origins, the ekphraseis, still bound strictly to classical tradition, would become less and less reliable. This does not seem to have been the case. Neither in the ekphraseis, nor in the shorter inscriptions, was there any chronological development toward a lesser or a greater accuracy in the employment of literary formulae. We have found the apt use of *topoi* in the sixth-century works of Procopius and Choricus of Gaza, in the tenth-century poem of Constantine the Rhodian, and more than once in the long ekphrasis written by Mesarites around the year 1200. On the other hand, the clear misuse of literary *topoi* has been found in a sixth-century inscription at Nikopolis, in a ninth-century sermon by Photius, and in an early fourteenth-century inscription at Asinou. The explanation for the variations in the accuracy of the ekphraseis must be provided not by the dates of the authors, but by their relative skills. Ekphrasis was a highly artificial and also a very demanding exercise. Frequently the composer of an ekphrasis was describing an object which his audience could already see for themselves. For example, in 867 the Patriarch Photius delivered in the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople the homily mentioned above in which he described the apse mosaic of Mary carrying her Child.<sup>143</sup> The twelfth-century Greek preacher Philagathus has left us a description of the Palatine chapel in Palermo, in Sicily, which was also delivered in the very building.<sup>144</sup> In the case of the shorter, epigrammatic descriptions, we have found that these were often attached to the works of art themselves, in the form of inscriptions. In all these instances it is obvious that the purely descriptive value of the ekphrasis was superfluous. And even in the case of the ekphrasis on the Holy Apostles by Mesarites, which he seems to have written while he was in Constantinople, one wonders how many of the readers were completely ignorant of the appearance of the church. At the end of the ekphrasis there is a long encomium of the Patriarch of Constantinople, John X, which suggests that he was one intended reader, who must already have been well acquainted with the building.<sup>145</sup>

If the authors of the ekphraseis described buildings and works of art which were often familiar to their audience, this was no less true of the literary *topoi* which they incorporated into their descriptions. The modern reader may well be unfamiliar with the paraphrases and quotations, but the educated Byzantine presumably knew them. In this connection it is interesting that in his encomium Mesarites compares the rhetoric of the Patriarch to that of Hermogenes of Tarsus, the second-century orator who codified the ekphrasis. In many cases, therefore, the Byzantine orator was describing a work of art

<sup>143</sup> Mango, *The Homilies of Photius*, 279 ff.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. *supra*, note 116.

<sup>145</sup> XLIII, ed. Downey.

known to his hearers with a known set of quotations or formulae. The skill must have come in matching the one to the other; an unskillful writer, like John Phocas, produced inaccurate descriptions, but the clever author managed to quote aptly, so that his exercises had the virtues of both precision and literary erudition. The achievement was perhaps not unlike that of the Byzantine composer of the *Christos paschon*, who made up his drama of the Passion out of a patchwork of quotations from classical tragedies and the Bible. Our conclusion must be that the literary traditions of the ekphraseis make it necessary to interpret these documents with extreme caution, but they by no means render all Byzantine descriptions of works of art invalid.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> The sequel to this article will discuss the extent to which the emphasis on the depiction of emotion (particularly sorrow) in Byzantine ekphraseis can be justified with reference to surviving works of art.